

The Children's Revenge

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Characters:	TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Grayson Purpled (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Lani Smith LanuSky , Clay Dream's Sister Drista (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Sykkuno (Video Blogging RPF) , Valkyrae Rae , Scott Smajor1995 Dangthatsalongname , Jimmy Solidarity , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Justin TimeDeo , Bitzel (Video Blogging RPF) , Kit Wispexe , Luke LukeOrSomething , Beau Beautie_ (Video Blogging RPF) , Oliver Brotherhood Mumbo Jumbo , Katy FalseSymmetry , Original Characters , Other streamers , Aimee Aimsey (Video Blogging RPF) , Dylan BoomerNA (Video Blogging RPF)
Additional Tags:	Heavy Angst , Angst , Past Character Death , Implied/Referenced Drug Use , Panic Attacks , Avian TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Elytrian Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Shulker Toby Smith Tubbo , Phantom Wilbur Soot , Piglin Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , ORIGINS FOR EVERYONE , except drista and the rest of the humans , Science Fiction , Star Trek References , Star Wars References , Character Death , Minor Character Death , Violence , Blood and Gore , Mentions of genocide , Blood Vines The Crimson The Egg , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Unreliable Narrator , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , Grayson Purpled Needs a Hug , Implied/Referenced Child Abuse , Depression , Emotional Manipulation , Morally Ambiguous Character , Suicidal Thoughts , Clay Dream's Revive Book (Video Blogging RPF) , except it's not a revive book and it's complicated , reverse plot armor , no remorse we die like the children's rebellion , READ THE DAMN WARNINGS , Ambiguous/Open Ending , Bittersweet Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Children of the Stars
Collections:	

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The Children's Revenge

by [Aria_Cinabun](#)

Summary

His name was Tommy Innes, and everything he had ever known—and everything he had ever done—was nothing in the face of his greatest enemy. Everything he had ever fought for in his life had nearly been destroyed by the one Avian that would haunt him for the rest of his life, however short that would be.

Chroma.

And he would tear down every path, forge every weapon, run through fire and smoke, cry over every grave and remember every person the Avian had ever taken from him, destroy every life that he'd ever hoped to have in order to save his friends.

In order to save his family, however small that dwindled.

His name was Tommy Innes, and he would have his revenge.

(Even if it would kill him. Even if it would kill them both.)

(You MUST have read The Children's Rebellion to understand this fic)

Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: this story is dark.. It has semi-realistic events—the characters are not perfect (by far), and many of them give horrible advice. If you feel like you need help, please contact the National Suicide Prevention line at (800-273-8255).

I also do not enjoy giving out trigger warnings at the beginning of chapters. This is a personal choice, as I feel it gives away too much. If you do not like, do not read.

Here is the list of the following trigger warnings that will probably take place during the story:

Yelling/Shouting
Racism/Xenophobia
Blood & Gore
Suicidal Thoughts/Attempt
Panic Attacks
Manipulation
Possible Minor Character Death
Possible Major Character Death
Murder/Executions
Child Abuse
Drug Abuse
Starvation
Needles
Mass Genocide/Shootings
Torture
Emotional Manipulation

If you do not feel like you will be able to handle ANY of these, then please exit this fic immediately. This is your second, and only, warning that these triggers will take place somewhere in this story.

Thank you for entering the final era of the Children of the Stars.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Welcome Back

*"The magic thing about home
is that it feels good to leave
and it feels even better to come back."*

- Wendy Wunder

On a faraway planet—perhaps closer to the Polaris system, though not quite—Tommy Innes, nat-born son of Sam Innes, adopted son of Philza and Kristen Minecraft, and the former leader of the Children's Rebellion—stared up at the universe; at the billions of cold stars and the lightyears between him and empty space; at the dark matter that causes the night sky's lights to flicker; at the constellations that he didn't know the names of but Technoblade Minecraft probably did, at the glow from the stars that was thousands of years old, and wondered when he had found the time to grow up.

It wasn't exactly cold—it was actually the summer season on HIP-6528-P-4A, or, as Tubbo had so unscientifically named it, Small Boi. Still, Tommy, standing in the middle of the small prairie, shivered slightly as his eyes flickered across the splash of purple and blue that flared their way across the sky. He wasn't technically even needed on the surface—which was why he was staring at the stars—and George, Jack, Lani, and Tubbo, were all meticulously collecting samples to test when sentient life would have theoretically formed on this planet, on which life never would form on due to specific chemical circumstances.

Or something like that. Tommy didn't know. He wasn't even allowed to use the glass vials because he'd broken the last one he'd touched. He broke a lot of things he touched.

"Tommy!" someone called, and Tommy turned his head slightly, unclasping his hands from behind his back as he turned to fully face Tubbo. The Shulker was making his way across the

tall grass, holding a red-topped vial rack in his hands, his expression light—just a bit more than usual. "It's almost time to beam up, bossman. You ready?"

"I wasn't exactly doing anything," he said, raising an eyebrow and lifting up a hand to brush the hair out of his face. Ugh. He really wanted to cut it, but he had a feeling Techno would *murder* him. And, well, he was scared of Techno, even if he would never say it aloud. "Just staring at the stars."

"Ah," Tubbo said, his words turning wistful. "Do you suppose he's up there? Looking down on us?" Tommy frowned, confused. "Do you believe in that sort of thing?"

"I do," Tommy said slowly, comprehension dawning.

"You think he's judging us, then?" Tubbo said, with a small laugh that wasn't all happy. He squinted his eyes and peered up at the stars, and there was silence for all of a second. "For our choices?"

"I think," Tommy said, choosing his words carefully. It was newly spring again, Earth-time—it had almost been a year since he'd met the crew of the *L'manburg*, and about six months since Ranboo's death. Even now, it still hurt. He had a feeling it always would. "I think he would've been glad we were alive."

Tubbo snorted loudly. "Yeah, not like they give us dangerous missions anymore, bossman," he muttered, kicking at the dirt.

Tommy raised an eyebrow at him. "The only 'dangerous missions' around nowadays are the frontlines," he said coolly, speaking of the war that the Arachnids had officially declared on the Galactic Rebellion. "And you know our ship isn't built for that. It's an explorer's vessel." He gestured widely. "We're *exploring*. Just because we technically battled an Arachnid warship *once* doesn't make us a battleship. Save that shit for the *Mira*."

"Exploring is boring," Tubbo said, and then snickered. "Ha. That rhymes."

"It's what keeps you alive, big man," Tommy said fervently, clasping his hands behind his back once more. "It's what keeps all of us alive." He didn't mention that he'd overheard both Phil and Kristen arguing with ground command on multiple occasions to pass laws that banned children from being allowed on spaceships. Tommy didn't quite hold it against them, not after everything that had happened. He knew that Purpled, Tubbo, and Drista all would, though, so he kept his mouth shut and never mentioned it.

His comm flashed, and Tommy answered it with a flick of his wrist, never lowering his gaze from the sky.

› *Bridge crew to ground team, are you ready for extraction?* ‹

Tommy cleared his throat at Wilbur's familiar voice. "Copy that, Wilbur," he said. "You might want to contact Niki and Jack's team, though. I only have Tubbo next to me."

› *You walked off again?* ‹

"I did *not*," Tommy scoffed. "I'm in the middle of the field that we were beamed down on, fucker. They just went into the forest. There ain't no stars in the fuckin' forest, so I stayed out here. They're quite pretty, really."

Tubbo leaned over closer to the mic. "Relax, Lieutenant," he said in a slight drawl. "There's no sentient life on this moon."

Tommy looked at him, taking his hand off the button. "This is a *moon*?" he asked, shocked.

Tubbo blinked at him. "Yeah," he said slowly. "We landed on the dark side; the gas giant that it's orbiting is visible on the other side—*hang* on, did you not read the brief file?"

"It looked boring," Tommy said. "I was too lazy. You guys would have told me if it was something important."

"You are ridiculous," Tubbo snorted.

Tommy smiled and raised the comm to his mouth again, this time sending the communication through the default channel. "Ground team—I guess, team two—to the *L'manburg*, you have the all-clear signal to beam us up."

› *Copy that, Ensign.* ‹

It was Fundy talking, this time, which was why he called Tommy by his rank instead of his name, and Tommy made a face. Still, he closed his eyes and steadied his feet, taking a breath of fresh atmospheric air before light swirled around them. He appeared in the transporter room of the *L'manburg* that was drifting above the planet's—or, rather, the moon's—stratosphere. The air immediately smelled recycled. It was, but that was beside the point.

"Fundy," Tubbo said, by way of greeting, as he stepped off the dematerialization platform. "Where's the others?" Glancing around, Tommy noted that Niki, Jack, Lani, and George were still missing. He quickly shook his head before he jumped to the worst conclusion.

"They're picking up the sciency-stuff," Fundy said amicably, orange-red Kitsune ears twitching. "And that's Junior Lieutenant to you."

"I outrank you," Tubbo said instantly. "That's *Lieutenant* Underscore to you."

Fundy rolled his eyes as he leaned back over his station, pushing his headset mic over his mouth. "George, I read you. You four clear?" His tail twitched as he cocked his head, waiting for an answer, and Tommy hurriedly stepped off the platform just in case the transporter somehow glitched and made people land on him. "Gotcha."

Tommy stuck his hands in the pocket of his uniform and listened to the telltale hum that filled the air. Four figures appeared, two of them—Jack and George—carrying more oversized vial trays than Tubbo was, and most of them were filled with dirt. Science dirt.

Tommy didn't really know much about biology or why it was necessary during war-time. He didn't really pay attention to that sort of thing. He just knew that they *were*, and that Tubbo had that glint in his eyes that told that he was about to attempt something Tommy wouldn't like.

"Come," Niki said brightly and brushed the pink tips of her hair back from her shoulders. She'd stopped dying her hair, and it had turned a pale blue, the color of her birth people, but that was only due to a lack of proper Merling hair dye, something that Tommy had heard her complain about on multiple occasions over the past few months to anyone that would listen. And since everyone was scared of the fierce Merling doctor, everyone listened. "We need to go debrief."

"About what?" Tommy asked cheekily. "Dirt?"

"How dare you," Jack said. "This is more than simple dirt, you cretin—"

"Jack," Niki sighed. The Blazeborn shut up. "I know you don't like debriefs, Tommy, but it's regulation."

"We go against regulation, like, every day," Tommy pointed out. Tubbo snorted loudly.

"I'd rather we try *not* to go against regulation as much as possible," Niki said patiently.

"I didn't even take a single *bit* of dirt," Tommy protested. "I don't see why I need to go sit in a circle and talk about fucking *dirt*—"

"It's not dirt!" Jack yelped. "It's critical scientific evidence that life has the ability—" He cut himself off when Niki gave him a look. "Never mind."

"Can we just get this over with so I can go back to sleep?" George asked wearily, his Feline ears flattening against his brown hair. "I'm tired."

"You're always tired," Tommy said. "And I don't wanna."

"Tommy," Niki sighed.

Tommy caught a flash of black feathers and was out of the room so fast that he could've been a roadrunner in another life. "Phil!" he shouted, and the Elytrian only had half a second of reaction time to turn around and catch Tommy's flailing limbs as he leaped on his adoptive father and all but cowered behind him. "Phil, please save me!"

"Mate," Phil said pleasantly, grabbing Tommy's forearms. "What's going on?" Tommy assumed that he knew that nothing horrible was going on, otherwise he would've drawn the phaser sitting in the holster at his side.

Something horrible *was* happening, though. Tommy didn't want to be forced to go debrief about fucking *dirt*.

"It's just a debriefing, Captain," Niki said, as she exited the room. "He doesn't want to go."

"Phil, Philza, Philza Minecraft, the bestest and greatest, the *one and only*, the creator of Minecraft, the Captain of the *L'manburg*, Dadza—" Tommy said, only babbling *slightly*. "Please do not make me go to this horrible and no-good debriefing, O'Father mine. It sucks and I do not want to suck with it. I do not wish to become one with the dirt. I am not going to become a—a *worm*. Do not doom me to become a worm, Philza Minecraft."

Phil looked vaguely amused, his black wings shifting closer to his body. "Is that what this is about? From the way you were talking, I thought the world was about to end."

"It *is* ending," Tommy hissed, throwing Jack and George the stink-eye, the latter of whom gave him a blank look and the former of whom glared right back. "I do not want to become a *worm*, Phil. That is not in my future."

"You're not going to become a worm, Tommy," Phil said, still amused, and now trying to hold back a laugh.

"But I will, Phil! I will!" Tommy cried out. "They're wrong'uns. They eat dirt and shit!"

"Only the good dirt," Tubbo cut in.

"Don't egg him on," Lani hissed at her brother.

"Nihachu, does he really need to do the debriefing?" Phil asked, ruffling Tommy's hair.

The Merling gave a long sigh. "You let him get away with too much, Phil," she said mournfully, but there was no resentment behind it. "Alright."

"Not like he would've added anything meaningful to the conversation anyway," Jack muttered.

"Hey!" Tommy said, jabbing a finger in the Blazeborn's direction. On the hand that wasn't partially paralyzed. "At least I'm not a dirty bitch!"

"What the fuck does that mean?" Jack objected.

"You, prick. You."

"Tommy," Phil said tiredly. "If you're not going to the debriefing, at least don't hinder the others." He dipped his head politely at Niki. "Let's hope it's not that much paperwork this time."

"Shouldn't be," Niki said, shrugging her shoulders to release tension. "Although it might keep our dear Quartermaster busy for a few extra hours and out of trouble."

Phil smiled at her. "In that case, make sure there's *extra* paperwork."

"Hey!" Tommy protested. "Don't keep Purpled busy with paperwork because you can't handle our teamwork."

"You mean your shenanigans," Phil stressed, as he prodded Tommy down a hallway perpendicular to the one where Niki and the others were heading. Tommy managed to peek his head around Phil's body and massive wings to wave goodbye to Lani and Tubbo, as well as flip off a fuming Jack. "I see the work before it's sent back to Command, Tommy. I know the amount of balls you go through."

Tommy sniffed. "I am a Big Man, Philza Minecraft. I go through many balls."

"You little shit," Phil said with a laugh, shaking his head, blue eyes dancing with mirth. "That's not what I meant. I meant tennis balls."

"That's Drista, not Purpled," he said.

"Purpled's there."

"So?"

"So you need to stop destroying tennis balls."

"They're like four credits a pack, Phil."

"It's not the price I'm worried about," Phil said, rolling his eyes. "It's the fact you're going through three packs a *week*."

"I am a man of many balls, Philza Minecraft," Tommy said solemnly. "Don't judge what I use up where."

"Please stop talking," Phil sighed, as he brought Tommy to the cafeteria.

Tommy brightened when he saw Drista and Purpled sitting at the table, eating dinner—it was like eight in the evening, Earth-time, which made sense. He left Phil behind and ran over to the table, swooping in and stealing a slice of apple from Drista's plate. Theoretically swooping, that was. He didn't have wings like the great and powerful Philza Minecraft. And Tommy didn't quite feel like sleeping for eight hours if he overused his Avian biology. It was getting better—he could run for miles and miles, now!—but still.

"Hey!" Drista protested.

"Too slow," he said, shoving the apple in his mouth as he did so.

"Chew with your mouth closed," Purpled said, not looking up from where he was scrolling through his datapad.

"Are those chicken nuggets?" Tommy asked him, squinting at his plate. "*Dinosaur* shaped?"

"Yes," Purpled deadpanned. "Karl ordered them from Earth's America."

Tommy made a face. "Ugh. Americans."

"*I'm* American."

"Exactly," Tommy pointed out. He looked over at the doorway. Phil had vanished. "Phil abandoned me here."

"I think you abandoned *him*," Drista said, looking at the entryway meaningfully. She dug her spoon into her mac 'n cheese and ate a bite. "I see you're back from your trip. Run into anybody?"

"The stars," Tommy said. "And some dirt. They're quite dirty fellows, those scientists..." Purpled finally looked up from his datapad, and Drista stifled a snicker. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Sure," Purpled said. "Okay."

Tommy frowned at him, standing up from where he was sitting next to Drista to peer across the table at the blonde-haired boy. "Are you doing *paperwork* at the dinner table?" he asked, astonished, as he caught something along the lines of hazard control.

Purpled pursed his lips as he turned the datapad around to show Tommy. "This," he said. "Is an environmental hazard report form."

Tommy squinted at him. "All I heard was meh meh meh."

"It's about Tubbo setting off a smoke grenade in the recreational room," Purpled said. "I have to fill it out and attain his signature for suitable... punishment. Which is like nothing, because

Command is too busy dealing with the war to punish people who didn't actually damage the ship."

"That was funny, though," Tommy said.

"But still requires paperwork," Purpled said. He raised an eyebrow. "It was quite... humorous, though, I must admit."

"You sound like you have a stick up your fuckin' arse," Tommy said. "Come on, man! Lighten up!"

"I'll lighten up when Chroma is in the grave," Purpled snapped. Tommy blinked at him, sitting down heavily. Drista paused, spoon in her mouth, her green eyes wide as she looked between the two boys. Purpled glared at the table for a second, before pushing away his tray. "I'm not hungry. I'll be in my room."

Tommy watched him go, wilting slightly. "I went too far, didn't I?"

"No," Drista said quietly, swallowing her mouthful. "Purpled is just stressed. Chroma was spotted earlier today."

Tommy hit his arm on the table and winced as pain shot up his elbow. "What?" He suddenly felt...cold. Like the ship's temperature had dropped twenty degrees, even though Philza Minecraft would *never* allow that, because then the Blazeborns and Piglins would freeze.

"Yeah," Drista said, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her datapad. She opened it with a touch of her finger and slid it over to Tommy with one finger.

He read the messaged report—it had been to Philza, from Toast, who was fighting on the frontlines in the *Mira*—and apparently, Purpled had intercepted it. Maybe illegally. He wasn't going to question that.

Chroma had been spotted in neutral space, nowhere close to where Tommy had ever been. Nowhere close to them. It was very short. To the point. No details. Nothing about murders or more genocides.

It didn't matter.

Tommy handed the datapad back to Drista before he broke it. He clenched his fists in his hand, his nails digging small crescent moons in his palms. Drista set her datapad aside carefully and reached over, placing her hand on top of Tommy's.

"Hey," she said quietly. "We're nowhere near there. We get our missions directly from Command. He won't find us." *He won't kill us*, she didn't say, but her eyes spoke a thousand words.

"What if he goes after other children?" Tommy asked, blinking back tears. "What if he targets others?"

Drista raised her chin and looked at him, her face weary. "Maybe he will," she said quietly, and Tommy dropped his eyes to the flecks on the table and traced their every line. "He's a wildcard in this war. Command isn't prioritizing him."

Tommy let out a painful laugh, sinking lower into the bench seat. "I should've killed him six years ago," he spat bitterly. "I should've murdered him in his sleep. I should have cut his fucking throat."

Yeah, this was why he had mandated therapy.

Drista gave him a look. "Maybe if you would've, then this would all be different," she said amicably. "But it's not your fault you didn't." Tommy gave her a look. "Really, it's not, Tommy. You didn't know. Unless you've suddenly gained the ability to see into the future—"

"Wouldn't that be just the bloody thing," Tommy muttered.

"—then you can't blame yourself," Drista continued. "Not for things like this."

Tommy let out a long breath through his nose and rested his forehead against the table, straining his back slightly as he did so. Part of him was seriously debating slamming his head against the table in an honest attempt to become better—but he didn't think Drista was on his side on that one, so he refrained from doing so. He could feel Drista's judgmental stare on the back of his head, so he sighed and turned his face so his cheek rested against the cool table. "Do you think he would be proud?" he asked.

Drista paused from eating more of her mac 'n cheese. "If you're talking about your birth father," she said carefully. "Then I think he would be *damn* proud of you." Tommy blinked at the ferocity in her voice. "If you're talking about Ranboo, or any of the others..." Her features softened slightly. "Then of course they are, Tommy," she finished quietly. "You've made it this far, yeah?"

"Just another forty years to go," he said, feeling weight that didn't actually exist settle over his shoulders.

"Look on the bright side," Drista said cheerfully. "At least you don't have to do paperwork for the rest of your life!"

"Yay me," he sighed.

Months ago, he had learned that he couldn't ever *stop* the momentum of a tennis ball flying at his face. Or a bullet, for that matter. Acceleration and velocity simply didn't work like that.

But he could... adjust it.

The day that Tommy managed to minutely adjust the movement of said ball away from hitting him in the chest to hit his arm instead was the day that Drista shouted the ship down until Hannah burst in, phaser raised, having apparently thought someone was getting murdered. The day that Tommy succeeded for the first time was coincidentally the only day that he hadn't slept for fifteen hours.

Staying up the next time hadn't help. In fact, he hadn't managed to shift the momentum of a tennis ball again for another two weeks.

Like a lot of things, it didn't get easier over time. When he grasped for the air molecules around a ball going fifty miles per hour—roughly one-twentieth the speed of a bullet, which was his ultimate goal—he was also grasping for people that he would never hear again. He was grasping for voices that were slowly fading in fragmented memories of things he wanted to remember and things he wanted to block out. He was swimming in blood, at Death herself, grabbing at fragments of happy memories and the most that were drenched in fire and pain.

Over time, their voices faded. His birth father's had become Tommy's own voice and sometimes—though he ignored the snide little voice that screamed *replacement, replacement*—Phil's. But Tommy had accepted that a long time ago, because it had been six years since Sam's death, and while he had neither moved on nor replaced him, there were people that he looked up to in the same way that he had his father.

What Tommy hadn't accepted was forgetting Ranboo's voice, only half a year later after the Enderian had died. Bad had said that was a normal time—in fact, it was normal to forget a voice in an even shorter amount of time—but Tommy was angry and scared and he got Purpled to slice through old recordings and watched them during nights he couldn't sleep.

That was most nights.

Sometimes Tubbo joined him, sitting quietly at the foot of the bed as Tommy watched Ranboo play football—sorry, Dream, *soccer*—on the court in the main gym. Sometimes it was Lani, as they watched the two do old practicals for med school and Ranboo gave Lani the evil eye every time she misnamed a virus. Less often it was Drista, and it was never when Tommy was watching old holos—it was unexpectedly when Tommy chose to read Percy

Jackson. The second series. Half the times he cried it was imagining Ranboo's clawed hands on it, a crooked smile on his face as he handed Tommy the book. In the other half he distracted himself with pretty words and compared himself to the main characters. He thought he gave off Leo vibes.

Drista introduced him to Ender's Game, a *really* old Earth novel. He hadn't even known she could read. It was good, in a sad sort of way—a young boy, a genius, tricked into doing something 'for the good of humanity.'

God, that could make anybody lose their mind. In fact, Ender *did* lose his mind. He'd wondered if Drista had had a second motive for giving him this book, but if she had, she'd never showed it.

He'd never thought that he'd find his way here—to spend his nights watching holos of Ranboo with friends so that he wouldn't forget his voice; the same ones over and over again because he wanted to hear his friend laugh again; he wanted to memorize the tone of his voice forever and ever. He'd never thought he'd spend other nights reading books, sometimes with Drista, and occasionally, on the days Tommy found he couldn't sleep—particularly when they were landlocked; but that was the Arachnids' experimentation fucking with him—Technoblade, who always read books on old wars and sometimes mythologies of different species'.

Four times a week, two hours a day, he, Lani, and Drista took lessons from each of the various crew members. Turned out, that with enough people, they could parse together a teaching team. He did some mechanical engineering with Finn, some math with Harvey—even Techno stepped in and taught them some galactic history—and finally, finally got his flying permit after two months of taking lessons whenever they checked in with Earth.

And the war crawled slowly on.

The *Mira*, Toast's ship, was on the frontlines, and sometimes Tommy awoke in the middle of the night with a shout in his head and prayed for Rae and Sykkuno, the only other two Avians in this lonely universe. Usually, it meant that the ship had been attacked—this was a *war*, after all—and then he would sit and wait patiently—or impatiently, depending on who you asked—by the transmitter and wait for a message with Mellohi and Ca'jat, the two dhi'sks, curled up around him.

He knew Rae was alive, of course. The same way he knew that Techno was alive. That didn't mean she couldn't be a prisoner of war and everyone else on the Mira could be dead.

Bad told him it was obsessive.

Nobody stopped him.

Sometimes Techno, who could sense he was awake, joined him in silence, often writing out reports and requests to send back to Command.

The *L'manburg* continued its exploratory missions—nowhere near Arachnid territory; into new, unexplored territory, actually—and sometimes it felt like the entire crew was on the toes of their feet, waiting for the tipping point. Tommy saw all types of dirt—brown, red, orange, and even green—and stepped foot on a dozen moons and planets. The stars were different every time, but sometimes Techno would come with him and point out Terra or Elytra, depending on where they were. It seemed a million bazillion lightyears away, but they were still in the same branch of the galaxy.

He piloted the *L'manburg* for the first time two weeks after he got his permit, with Dream behind him and Wilbur gleefully strapped to a seat, and the rest of the crew pretending that he wasn't in the piloting seat. It was easier than he thought, but still nerve-wracking and stressful—and all he'd had to do was travel through warp speed and then traverse to a planet to orbit around it. Not even land or dock it.

Tommy turned eighteen surrounded by the crew of the *L'manburg*, with a cake and dozens of people singing happy birthday very badly out of tune.

His favorite present was a new knife from Purpled, its hilt a glimmering green.

Chroma wasn't spotted again.

Tommy began to relax slowly, because maybe Chroma *had* crawled back into the corners of the galaxy to live out the rest of his years—which wasn't many; he was an Avian, after all—and slowly Purpled loosened up as well. He even put down his datapad for a few hours instead of checking Philza's inbox for news of the Avian that had been looking for them for a long time. He watched movies with the other children. They played games in places they shouldn't.

But he was Tommy Innes, son of Sam Innes, Avian extraordinaire—and his destiny was already written; his story already told by someone far greater than himself.

So when the day came that his luck turned around, Tommy couldn't exactly say he was surprised.

technoblade never loses (except when he does)

"The best way to protect the future

is to invent it."

- Alan Kay

"Planet A7-421-36C," Wilbur read aloud from the datapad, sounding bored. "No sentient life, but forests and eukaryotic organisms have been pre-scanned and have been confirmed to exist. The science team says they want to collect more life."

"You mean dirt," Tommy said, slouching in his chair.

"Sure," Wilbur nodded. "Dirt." George scowled, but didn't bother. He'd learned after a while to not say anything about Tommy's lack of professionalism. It wasn't worth it.

"Great," Phil said. "Anyone else want to go down?"

Tommy raised his hand. Tubbo followed shortly after. Tommy because he liked solid ground, and Tubbo because he was a nerd, in Tommy's opinion.

"As expected—" Phil started, looking at the two fondly.

Purpled coughed into his fist and then slid his datapad towards Tommy, who frowned at him, picked up the piece of tech, blanched, and then was glad that he didn't have higher strength than Humans, otherwise, the datapad would have cracked under his grip.

"Changed my mind," he choked out. "I'm not going down." Purpled gave him a look, and he ignored the other boy.

"Okay, mate," Phil said, giving him a weird look and taking back one of the forms he'd been about to hand to Purpled to fill out for Tommy and Tubbo.

"Huh? Why?" Tubbo asked, because he was nosy like that.

"It has a red sky," Purpled said, and the room went dead silent. Tommy dropping the datapad clattered loudly in the silence, a picture taken from the rover of a sky that reminded him of a splatter of blood ingrained in his head.

"It's just atmosphere," he found himself saying aloud. "It's just—it's not that. It's not."

"Uh-huh," Purpled said, sounding skeptical.

"Shut up," he said. "I'm going to bed."

"It's three in the afternoon," Wilbur pointed out.

"I don't give a shit," he snapped, standing up and storming out of the room.

"Tommy!" Purpled called after him, having followed him into the hallway. "Tommy, wait!"

"Fuck off," he snarled over his shoulder.

"Maybe I shouldn't have told you, then," Purpled retorted, and Tommy stopped in the middle of the hallway. "Maybe I should have let you go down there."

"I'm better," he insisted, hearing his friends' steps pause as they drew nearer. "I'm better now."

"Better doesn't mean okay."

He snorted. "Do you think we'll ever be okay?"

Purpled was silent. "No," he said finally, though not weakly. "But man, you gotta stop fucking lying to yourself."

"I'm not," he said, lying.

"You know," Purpled said, and Tommy turned to face him, his gaze meeting odd magenta eyes that had amusement glinting in them. "Whenever you say that, you're lying."

"I am a very good liar."

"In your dreams, bird brain."

"Don't call me that!"

Purpled gave him a look, and Tommy fell silent. "Look," his friend said. "I get it. You're telling yourself that you're better, and maybe that makes you feel better. But that doesn't mean you *are* better. Fucking hell, you can't look at a red sky and not feel sick."

"I feel fine."

"You looked like you were going to hurl all over the briefing table," Purpled said. Tommy scrunched his nose up. He was *not*.

...Okay, maybe he had felt a little sick—but he wasn't going to vomit! That would've been gross!

"And I get it," Purpled said. "Red skies remind you of—"

"—blood," Tommy said, his throat thick as he interrupted Purpled. "It reminds me of blood and death and pain." Purpled blinked at him, but there was only understanding and clarity in those eyes. Man, he hated how his friend could see straight through his shields and into his heart. He took a deep breath and let it out, trying to calm his racing heart. "It reminds me of another time."

Purpled tilted his head at Tommy, face wary. "We're losing people, Tommy. Something's going to change within the next year. I can feel it in the air."

"The recycled air," he joked.

Purpled rolled his eyes. "Everyone can," he said. "It's why the Captain is so antsy and why Lieutenant Wilbur and Commander Technoblade keep checking in on you."

Tommy made a face. "I think they're just clingy wrong'uns."

"I think they're worried about you," Purpled countered. "I think everyone's worried about us."

"Sounds like a them problem."

Purpled reached over and grabbed Tommy's shoulder. "Listen to me," he said. "Because I'm only going to say this once." Tommy debated making a quip but quickly thought against it when he saw the seriousness in his friend's eyes. "We're both fucked up. Severely fucked up."

Everyone you've ever loved except for me is dead, barring people you met after you were seventeen."

Tommy stared at him. Blinked. "Thanks," he muttered. "I get it. Mom, Dad, my aunt, my sister, four-fifths of my friends from Pogtopia..." He let out a shaky breath. "Everyone around me dies."

"Right," Purpled said.

Tommy eyed him. "You're not exactly the best comforter."

"You want a shoulder to cry on, go to your adoptive father," Purpled said blithely. "That's never been the kind of person I am."

"Yeah, I sort of got that when you tricked me into watching the Hunger Games just to prove a point," Tommy said.

"I did apologize for that," Purpled said, raising an eyebrow; his face still impressively impassive. "But I don't regret it."

Tommy stared at him. "That's hypocritical."

"You know what I mean," the other boy grumbled. "I'm sorry, but I don't regret it. And one day soon, we're going to see Chroma again, and I'm going to kick him in the ass so hard that he'll wish he'd never been born."

"I wish he'd never been born."

Purpled smiled at him; a sickly, lethal thing. "Don't we all," he said. "Don't we all."

"You could eat a *little* bit slower, bee boy," Tommy noted as he watched Tubbo shove food into his mouth faster than the speed of light during dinnertime. Next to him, Drista snickered.

"Can't," Tubbo said, though, with his mouth full, it sounded more like, "Cah't."

"Why not?" Lani asked curiously.

"Dirt," Tubbo said

"You seem keen to only speak in monosyllabic sentences," Purpled said.

"Nerd," Drista said, pointing her fork in his direction. Purpled rolled his eyes at her.

Tommy made a face. "I *know* the science lab picked up more dirt from that stupid planet," he said.

"Red dirt," Purpled pointed out coolly.

Tommy ignored the pointed jibe. "Dirt is boring."

"Not this dirt," Tubbo said, having finally swallowed the last of his food. "George found a living organism—not sentient—and brought it back."

"Is that legal?" Lani asked curiously, looking at Purpled.

"It's not sentient," the magenta-eyed boy answered, his voice monotone, textbook style. "So it's like a plant."

"It breathes," Tubbo said. "George thinks. So not technically a plant."

Tommy made a face. "It has *lungs*?" That sounded gross.

"Or the planet's definition of lungs," Tubbo said with a shrug. "The x-ray should be finished by now, so I gotta go classify it with Jack and George and decide if it's vascular or nonvascular or a gymnosperm or an angiosperm."

Tommy watched Tubbo all but run out of the dining hall, heads turning towards him as he left in a hurry. Dream, across the cafeteria, made eye contact with Tommy, who shrugged, and then the Human shrugged in return and turned back to talking to Techno, who was sitting next to him.

Tommy swallowed the bite of ybsubli he'd been chewing—a Merling vegetarian-friendly dish—and said, "Did anyone understand what bee boy just said?"

"No," Drista and Purpled said in unison. Purpled was scrolling through his datapad, and Tommy wondered if he'd even been listening to what Tubbo had been talking about when he'd gone all science-y.

"Something about classifying the science lab's new specimen," Lani said.

"Sounds boring," Drista snorted. She turned to Tommy. "Wanna go shoot balls?"

Purpled choked, having just looked up from his datapad. "Excuse me?" he demanded.

"Tennis balls," Lani clarified.

"Oh. Hang on, you guys waste so many of those—"

"I can't," Tommy said, cutting across Purpled's words. "Techno said he'd give me another self-defense lesson today."

Drista smirked. "He's gonna beat your ass," she said.

Tommy nodded fondly as he remembered their last few lessons—when he and Techno had had time, of course; because Techno *was* a commander and he was usually swamped with duties, most of them boring—and yeah, Techno had kicked his ass every time except one.

The only time he hadn't was because Tommy had managed to make the drywall ceiling collapse on him, entirely by accident, when he'd been attempting to try to tire Techno out by running from him. The latter hadn't worked, of course—Techno had the stamina of a goddamned God, Tommy swore—but he had accidentally panicked and forced a bubble of air trapped in the wall to explode outwards.

Onto Techno.

It hadn't been funny in the moment—in fact, a metal pipe that had swung out had knocked Techno unconscious—and Tommy had screamed at the top of his lungs, had half a panic attack before the closest person, Hannah had managed to tell him that Techno still had a pulse.

Looking back, he would've been able to tell that Techno was dead because their bond would have snapped, but Tommy had never been the smartest person in the midst of a panic attack—nobody was, actually—and so had, obviously, assumed the worst.

Then Techno had commended him for his creativity and Tommy had to admit that it'd been an accident, which Techno had told him was 'part of the game', or whatever that meant,

because self-defense all but meant Tommy ran around the gym trying to take down Techno before he was pinned. And he was occasionally shown a few moves, but the art of fighting as an Avian was lost to their species—he'd asked Rae and Sykkuno, but neither of them had learned to fight in the ancient ways; they'd taken normal Human self-defense classes and added their own special things.

Tommy was really just trying things. Techno and Dream both agreed that the best way to practice was to try and fail and try and fail and try and fail until you succeeded.

Drista had said that Master Yoda wouldn't have agreed with that statement—*do or do not; there is no try* had been her actual words—and Tommy had no fucking idea what *that* had even started to mean, but both Techno and Dream had ignored the girl so he had followed their lead.

"He does most of the time," Tommy agreed finally. Eight out of nine times. This would probably be the ninth time he'd lose.

Drista snapped her fingers. "Oh, that reminds me," she said. "I was digging through the storage—"

"You're not cleared for that," Purpled pointed out.

"Shut up, Quartermaster, nobody cares about your dumb opinion," Drista said, and Purpled raised an amused eyebrow before going back to his datapad.

"Well, I can't say I didn't tell you," he sighed, with absolutely no anger behind his tone. "If the captain finds out, I'm not taking the fall."

"He's too busy trying to plot a course with Commander Techno to notice that I was rifling through the extra storage," Lani said diplomatically.

Drista grinned. "Exactly! Anyway, I found a box of books—like *real, actual* books—and to be fair they were mostly boring—like the Rise and Fall of Ancient Rome, which is like a bajillion years old from Terra—but I found some early twentieth-century books and I thought you'd like one 'cause I asked Eret and he said *The Name of the Wind* is really good."

"I've never heard of it," Tommy said, curiosity getting the better of him.

Drista waved her hand at him. "It's from the same period as the original Hunger Games books and...movie," she said, and everyone pretended her voice didn't break, and absolutely nobody looked at Tommy. "Pretty cool. I left it on your bed."

"You were in my room?"

"I opened the door. You didn't lock it."

Tommy glared at her, but he wasn't really angry. His room didn't really have anything to hide, and his most prized possessions—Sniff's golden feather and Ranboo's crushed allium—were on display on a shelf. Plus, Drista wasn't the type to snoop through his stuff.

Purpled *was*, but nobody said that.

"And Lani, I found one for you—I know you like those awful rom-coms—"

"Oh, shut up," Lani sighed.

"—so I found one titled *To All The Boys I Loved Before*, and it sounded dreadful, so I put it on your bed."

"You broke into *my* room too?" Lani asked, sounding amused.

"You both need to learn to lock your doors," Drista pointed out.

"Sorry, my bad," Lani said. "Next time when you steal something, I'm sure it'll be their fault because they didn't bolt it to the floor."

"Exactly," Drista said proudly.

"Drista, you didn't lock your door either," Purpled said, interrupting the flow between the two girls. "I watered your Chinese evergreen."

"Why were you in *my* room?" Drista demanded, green eyes going wide as she swung her head to look at the other Human.

He stared at her, deadpan. "You didn't lock the door."

Drista shrieked and tackled Purpled out of his bench, bringing her arm up to jam him in the solar plexus. Purpled fell to the ground, wheezing, but there was a fondness behind the laughter that let Tommy know he had all but let Drista do that, and hadn't touched any of the dozen knives he had hidden all over his uniform.

"Children," Wilbur drawled, his tray in his hands—he'd been attempting to walk down the aisle to return it, but now it was full of two Humans lying on the ground blocking the way. "You're blocking the aisle."

"Phase through us," Drista retorted.

Wilbur glared at her half-heartedly, walked up, held the tray over her head, and then shifted into his Phantom-form—pale blue, slightly seethrough—and Tommy watched in delight as the tray he'd been holding went right through his hands and crashed into the girl's hair.

Drista shrieked again and jumped at Wilbur, who was cackling, but for being an ex-child spy she hadn't thought this through, phasing through him and crashing onto the floor again. When she looked up Tommy was thrilled to see she had strands of spaghetti noodles and mushrooms in her hair. "You fucker!"

"Language," Bad chided from the table over. Everyone was watching them, and a few had datapads out and were recording for blackmail. Excellent. Tommy made a note of who was—he'd have to contact them and get that video. This was golden.

"Oops, my bad," Wilbur said, deadpan, as he returned to his normal form. "I was trying to walk down the aisle, sorry."

"Wilbur," Phil sighed as he stepped over Drista, raising his black wings so he didn't touch her with them, and stopped by the Phantom's side. "You're a little shit, you know that?"

"Aye, aye, Captain," Wilbur said, saluting smartly.

"I have spaghetti in my hair!" Drista wailed.

Tommy plucked a piece of greenery—some sort of Merling vegetable—from his plate and threw it at her head. This one she *was* able to dodge. "Take a shower, bitch."

"Tommy," Philza said warily. "Don't throw food at Drista."

He pouted. "But *Phil*..."

"No butts."

"Yeah, but butts are cool, innit?" Tommy said, smirking.

"You're a butt," Lani told him.

He scowled at her. "No, you—"

"Dismissed, all of you," Phil interrupted, his wings ruffling slightly.

"Wilbur, you can take their trays."

"Hey!" The Phantom complained. Phil threw him a look and he wilted. Tommy fought back a snicker. "Yes, Phil."

Drista got to her feet and dodged around her brother, who'd been trying to put more food in her hair. "This is the least professional ship I've ever served on," she huffed.

"This is the *only* ship you've ever served on," Purpled said calmly as he got to his feet, dipping his head in Phil's direction. Tommy stood up in sync with Lani, stepping out of the bench to walk in tandem with his friend.

"Aren't you supposed to be a good influence?" Philza asked him warily as they passed.

"Hey, man," Purpled said. "Tommy was the leader of the Children's Rebellion, not me." Tommy tripped on nothing at all—surprise, actually—and Purpled caught his elbow before he could fall flat on his face. Phil, Wilbur, and Dream all looked like they'd been caught in an ambush, and everyone who'd been listening to their conversation were now adamantly pretending they hadn't been listening. It was almost funny.

It would've been less funny if he hadn't glanced over at Sapnap's datapad and saw him reading a report. He hadn't even known Sapnap *could* read, but he was obviously merely pretending to skim the damn thing.

"Hey, Tommy," Techno said as they departed the cafeteria. "Thirty minutes?"

"Sure, big man," he said easily, saluting with two fingers. "See you then." Techno nodded as he turned back to his meal, leaning across the table to look at something Harvey was turning his datapad around for the commander to see.

"Want to help me with sorting reports?" Purpled asked him as they left the cafeteria behind them and headed into the hallway.

"*Fuck* no," Tommy retorted. "God, that's the most boring thing in the world."

"God forbid you to have to read actually pertinent things," Purpled said, amused.

"Fuck off," he said. "I'm gonna go bother Tubbo in the science lab. There's no *way* his dirt could possibly be interesting."

"You mean his multicellular organism," Purpled corrected.

"Whatever."

They parted ways at a crossroads, Purpled bidding him goodnight, though both of them were night owls and were probably insomniacs at that. Tommy picked up Mellohi on the way when he saw the dhi'sk wandering down the hallway, and she clawed him good-naturedly as he tucked her into his chest.

Tommy entered the science lab with only a bit of hesitance, putting Mellohi down outside and pushing her away with his foot, though he had no doubt Clementine would've locked him out if there was a necessary quarantine. Tubbo, Jack, and George surrounded a metal and glass habitat cage—or whatever it was called; he wasn't well-versed in science things—and only George looked up when Tommy entered.

"What're you doing here?" the Feline asked him.

"Watching you guys nerd over dirt," Tommy said, wandering closer. "I'm bored."

George rolled his eyes but stepped aside. Jack only gave him a cursory glance before looking back at whatever was in the metal box, and Tubbo didn't even look up. "Just don't break anything," he sighed.

Tommy frowned as he looked into the glass cage. It had about a quarter-inch thick layer of dirt at the bottom—regular old dirt—and nothing else, except for the small red and brown thumb-sized egg-looking thing. "Is that a bird egg?" he asked, squinting at it. It *was* egg-shaped.

"It's actually not!" Tubbo said excitedly, speaking for the first time since Tommy had entered the room. "I'm so glad you asked!"

"Oh, God," Jack muttered. "Here we go again."

"There's no sign of a yoke or any sort of membrane, much less an air pocket for breathing capabilities," Tubbo said. "Nor does there seem to be some type of growth in them that would indicate a reptile or mammal-type."

Tommy frowned. "But it breathes."

"George thought it did," Tubbo said. "George was wrong. It doesn't have lungs. It's an organism of some kind, through and through. Not a plant."

"It circulates oxygen," the Feline said easily, raising a gloved hand to tap at the glass slightly. "Look, it appears to be breathing." Tommy peered as close as he could—close enough so that his breath was fogging up the glass—and stared at it for a second. Sure enough, the outer layers of the egg thing seemed to be rising and falling, just a little bit. Like breaths. He could see where George could've drawn that conclusion.

"So...it's not going to hatch?" he asked slowly.

Tubbo hesitated. Jack jumped in. "We haven't had it long enough," the Blazeborn admitted. "It'll probably take a few weeks and more x-rays to determine if it's growing something inside of it like normal eggs would. It's alien, after all. Nothing like any of the journals have ever seen before."

"I could write my thesis on it if it's cool enough," George said dreamily. "Finally get my master's degree in alien organisms and flora."

"You have three degrees," Jack pointed out.

"It'd be cool to get another one."

Tommy stared at the egg. "So it's an egg."

"I was thinking of naming it Michael," Tubbo said.

"No," Jack said. "We are not naming a bit of alien organism after an archangel from the Bible. Besides, what if it's a species?"

"Then we name it Michaelleggo," Tubbo concluded.

"Eggo?" Tommy said. "Like the waffle?"

"No, like an egg," Tubbo said. "Because it looks like an egg." He frowned. "What the fuck do you mean, a waffle?"

George sighed. "If things don't have impressive names, then the namers don't seem impressive," he said. "We're not naming it Michaelleggo."

"I'll convince you," Tubbo said cheekily.

"No," Jack and George said in unison.

Tommy glanced at the clock on the wall. "I gotta go," he said. "Techno and I are supposed to be sparring in a few."

"You mean you're supposed to be losing," Tubbo said eloquently, his nose buried back in his datapad.

"Thank you, Tubbo," he grumbled. "Bye, guys."

"Goodbye," George said.

"Good riddance," Jack muttered.

"Piss off, hothead," he retorted to the Blazeborn.

He left the science lab and headed to his rooms, where he saw the book Drista had found—*The Name of the Wind*—lying face-up on the bed. He put it on the shelf under his nightstand, next to the *Enders Game* series, *Wheel of Time*, and *Percy Jackson*. Then he changed into his sparring uniform Techno had got commissioned for him—which was really just the same *L'manburg* uniform but with an empty holster for a phaser, two secret pockets for weapons—he put Purple'd's second birthday knife in one of them—and with about an inch of padding at the waist, forearms, and shoulders.

Techno pushed at the bond in his head, asking a question, and Tommy sent back *fuckoff-coming-don'tworry*. *Amusement-annoyance* coiled back at him, and Tommy shook his head in

mild vexation. Techno, despite not being an Avian, nor having the mental capability like Elytrians did, seemed to have picked up the bond-thing about as quickly as Kristin had with Phil.

Tommy left his rooms behind and went to go get his ass beat by a pig.

Michaeleggo

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT NOTE:

it is distinctly imperative to my sanity that you do NOT hide the creator's style. please. I worked hard on this.

p.s: Aria is acting weird --signed, Juliet

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Each betrayal begins with trust."

- Martin Luther

Over the next few days, the red egg-thing—Tubbo kept calling it Michaeleggo, but everyone agreed that was a fucking terrible name—grew a bit in size. By the end of the week, instead of a few inches, it was the size of Tommy's fist. After the next week, it was the size of one of those golden eggs that Tommy had seen in the fourth Harry Potter movie. The scientists still had no clue what sort of organism it was, because it somehow was alive and growing vines, but it wasn't exactly doing any harm, so they kept it aboard the ship.

Tommy left the ship a few times. Twice for two more exploratory missions and once to gather supplies with Wilbur at a local restocking station. Twice he flew the shuttle, though admittedly one of those times had been against Phil's orders. He ate breakfast. He went to Niki—against his will; largely—for checkups. He ran with Tubbo and Drista in the gym. He sparred with Techno, but never beat him. He and Purpled chucked metaphorical stones at each other's mental barriers and tried to pretend that a certain pact between them didn't linger like a smoke cloud over a city. He laughed with Phil and Kristin. He played piano—or, rather, with his half-paralyzed hand, he *attempted* to play the piano, and mostly succeeded—and Wilbur dragged his guitar in, their voices mixing well into the early morning because both of them had some sort of insomnia. He sat in the darkness of his room with his legs drawn to his chest and watched the holograms of his aunt and his father that they'd recorded so long ago. He chatted with Rae whenever they got in range; mostly over texts that took hours to send

and hours to receive back. He cried over his lost friends, and smiled at the dinner table. He pretended that his heart hadn't been splintered for months.

For a while, things were normal.

Then everything changed, because, you know, Tommy Innes' life was never going to be fucking normal.

It started out with a call. Tommy was with Techno, Wil, Phil, and Kristin at the time, playing Monopoly—and losing, but you couldn't tell him that; at least he wasn't out of the game like Techno, who had bitched about capitalism unhappily—when Phil had gotten a red-alert notification; what with him being the captain and all.

"What's going on?" Kristin asked, when Phil's face blanched as he glanced down at his communicator, his wings ruffling up despite his usual reputation.

"Hey," Wilbur complained unhappily, when Phil didn't answer. "I thought we agreed to no technology when playing family board games."

"Well, you should kick Techno out, then," Tommy said.

Techno rolled his eyes, looking up from where he'd been redoing his braid. "Good one."

"I'm hilarious."

"I need to go," Phil said suddenly. "Shit."

"Um," Tommy said, blocking Phil from leaving by sidestepping. "What's going on?"

"Phil?" Wilbur prompted, when their adoptive father didn't answer. "Dad?"

"Ship emergency," Phil said through gritted teeth, and, wow, that must've been a really bad one if he hadn't acknowledged Wilbur calling him Dad. "Bad attacked Skeppy. Techno, with me. The three of you stay here."

Tommy was too shocked to stand his ground when Phil stepped around him, his wings brushing Tommy's shoulder. Techno got to his feet, his brow furrowing worriedly, though that was about the extent of his facial emotions.

"What?" Wilbur yelped, speaking for the entire room. "But Bad and Skeppy are best friends!"

"I don't know," Phil said, pausing in the doorway. "Niki says he's not acting like he normally does. We could have a leak of some kind. The three of you *stay here* ." Techno shrugged apologetically before following the Elytrian out.

Tommy stared at the closed door, the Monopoly board forgotten on the ground next to him. "Skeppy wouldn't," he said weakly.

"No, he wouldn't," Kristin said, sitting up straight, her eyebrows furrowed worriedly. "Phil just told me he thinks it's mind control." Oh, they were talking mentally. If only he could do that with Techno. Speaking of which, Tommy projected immense feelings of annoyance and hate down his bond, and Techno responded with wryness.

How did one even respond with wryness?

"*Mind* control?" Wilbur asked, gaping. "Is that even a real thing?"

"Everything's possible in the unknown of space," Kristin replied lightly, but she still sounded worried.

Tommy blinked and thought of a story of someone that had not acted like themselves on a spaceship and had murdered another. A chill ran down his spine, and he turned to Kristin, and said, "Has Phil done a sweep of the ship?"

"What?" Kristin asked him, blinking in confusion.

"Like, to make sure that Bad hasn't been switched with an...imposter," Tommy said.

"I—I think we'd know that," Wilbur cut in. "I mean, Niki said he wasn't acting like he *normally* was, but not that he wasn't acting like himself."

"Yeah, but remember the incident of the *Mira* years ago?" Tommy said. "Why Rae and Sykkuno were marooned on that one random planet?"

"Yeah," Wilbur said slowly.

"Some sort of alien that kills its host and interjects itself into the ship," Tommy said. "Same memories, same fears, same everything. But instead of people, they became murderers."

"That file was sealed," Kristin said.

"Oh my God," Wilbur said weakly, collapsing in a nearby chair.

"I know it was sealed," Tommy said to Kristin. "But Rae's in my flock, remember?" He tapped the side of his head meaningfully.

"Oh my God," Wilbur said again.

"The *Mira* hasn't been in range for weeks," Kristin said. "Do you know anything else?"

Tommy swallowed. "I know that the hosts can't ever be recovered."

The silence was louder than his own voice, somehow.

"I also know they go for the kill," Tommy continued. "Skeppy's not dead. And that's not like...them...at all."

"So it might not be a parasitic mind-controlling alien," Wilbur said.

"It might not be," Tommy nodded.

Wilbur tilted his head, and said, "I'm not sure which one I prefer."

"What do you mean?" Kristin asked him. "I personally would prefer the parasite. At least we'd know it wasn't...him."

"Of course," Tommy said, understanding Wil's point of view almost instantly. "But if it's the parasite, it means that Bad is dead. There isn't a way to recover from that. Toast tried for months, but he had to kill them, in the end. His fellow crewmates, I mean, that were being inhibited by these aliens. They won't ever stop fighting. At least if it's Bad's own choice, there's still some of him left. But if it *is* Bad, and not the parasite..."

"But if it's Bad's choice," Wilbur finished. "Then he's betrayed the crew and tried to kill his best friend."

Kristin sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. "This is why I'm an ambassador," she muttered. "Not a psychologist."

"You wanted to be a psychologist?" Tommy asked, surprised.

"I thought about it," Kristin said truthfully. "But psychologists don't fly on spaceships, and I wanted to spend time with my then-boyfriend, now-husband."

"Simp," Tommy said.

Kristin rolled her eyes. "Oh, stop that."

Tommy's communicator blinked, and he looked down at it for a second before answering. "Big Man here."

It was Techno.

› *Tommy, we're roundin' up the crew to make sure nobody else is affected. Tubbo is in the science lab. Can you go get him?* ‹

Tommy sighed. "Yeah," he muttered. "I'll go get him."

› *Wilbur, can you take Kristin to the cafeteria? Then come join me in the interrogation room. We're going to examine the crew one by one since we're sure neither you nor I are affected.* ‹

"Sure," Wilbur said, raising his voice slightly. "How's Skeppy?"

› *He'll live. That's all we can ask for.* ‹

Tommy let out a breath. "Aye aye, commander," he said, giving a mock salute even though Techno couldn't see him. "Signing off."

› *Copy that.* ‹

"I'll meet you in the cafeteria in a few minutes," Tommy said as he used his hand to push open the door.

Wilbur eyed him. "You sure you know where Tubbo is?"

Tommy shrugged. "Sure. Where he's been for a week and then some. The fuckin' dirt room."

"The dirt—oh," Wilbur said. His eyes were worried. "Stay safe, okay?"

"You got it," Tommy said, and paused before they parted in the hallway. "You too, alright?"

Wilbur nodded his head, and Kristin waved at him—which he reciprocated—before they went down different paths; Wil to the cafeteria and Tommy towards the science laboratory.

He kept his hand in his uniform pocket; clenched fiercely around the knife, and made sure to glance around every hallway corner just in case someone was going to jump him.

What? It never hurt to be cautious—okay, maybe borderline paranoid, but still. He wasn't about to start psychoanalyzing himself.

The laboratory was open when he got there, which was weird because Jack always threw a fit about him leaving doors open. Tommy frowned, and wished, not for the first time, that he carried a phaser like most of the other crewmates.

Although he wasn't cleared to. Not because he was a child—Drista actually had one—but because his mental health was too bad, according to Niki, Eret, Bad, and just about every single fucking person on the ship. Traitors, all of them. He could carry a phaser and be just fine! He wasn't going to shoot himself!

...not until Chroma was dead, anyway.

Yeah, his mental health was *fine*. Nothing was wrong with it at all!

"*You're in denial,*" the tiny voice in his mind that sounded suspiciously like Purpled whispered.

"Fuck off," he grumbled, and peeked into the laboratory. "Oh, fuck."

The egg—the Egg?—had gotten larger. Much larger. Weirdly large. He needed different words for large. It was exponentially more massive than it had been the day before—roughly three feet tall and a foot wide. It was red with small pustules on it—gross—and the glass cage was shattered, red vines protruding out of the cage and onto the surrounding which was also odd—not to mention downright creepy. That was the first thing Tommy saw.

The second thing Tommy saw was a boy sitting against the far wall, his knees drawn to his chest, and his shoulders shaking like he was sobbing. Oh, God.

"Tubbo?" he called softly. "Tubbo, can you hear me?"

Tubbo didn't answer, but in the silence of the room, and even standing from the doorway, Tommy could hear his soft muffled sobs that made his heart hurt. He raised his communicator to his wrist and commed Phil. "Um, we have a problem."

› *What is it?* ‹

"You know that egg the scientists brought in? It grew larger. Faster. Way too fast. It's like three times bigger than when I saw it yesterday, and the glass is broken and shit."

There was a second of silence before Phil responded.

› *I just talked to George, and he says that it was fine three hours ago.* ‹

Tommy frowned. "Tubbo's here."

› *You sound worried. Is he okay?* ‹

"Well," Tommy said carefully. "He's across the room. The Egg thing now has vines coming out of it, and they're growing on the walls and shit." Tommy hesitated. "He won't respond to

my calls, and he's crying."

》 *Tommy Innes, do not enter that room; I repeat, DO NOT ENTER* — ‹

Tommy took a single step past the doorway and then screamed when a voice shrieked into his mind like a ca'jat's claws against a whiteboard.

TOMMY INNES.

"SHUT UP!" he shouted. "WHO ARE YOU?"

DO YOU THINK YOURSELF MORE POWERFUL THAN I, AVIAN?

"FUCK OFF!"

Tubbo hadn't responded to his shouts. He'd dropped his communicator in the process, too, and he was sure that if the mental assault was quieter he would've heard Phil's shouts on the other side.

DO YOU THINK YOURSELF ABOVE ALL OTHERS? DO YOU THINK THAT YOU WEREN'T MEANT TO DIE? THAT YOU CHEATED DEATH?

"My name is Tommy Innes," he said through gritted teeth. "Who the fuck are you?"

I AM *YOU*.

"No you're not," he scowled. "If you were me you'd be more self-deprecating." He blinked. "You're the Egg, aren't you?" Tommy looked at the thing to his right, narrowing his eyes at it, and wondered if he should attempt to throw his knife at it.

I KNOW WHAT YOU THINK.

"Good for you," he muttered, wincing as he picked his way across the vines, careful not to touch them. "Tubbo? Can you hear me?"

HE IS *MINE*.

"Not likely," Tommy scoffed. "Tubbo?" he tried again.

**I WILL BREAK YOU. I WILL END YOU. YOU ARE MINE, TOMMY INNES—
HOW ARE YOU NOT AFFECTED?**

"I'm just epic like that," Tommy said, finally reaching his friend. He touched the Shulker's arm, and jumped slightly when Tubbo lifted his head. His eyes were rimmed red. "Big Man? You okay?"

"It's so mean, Tommy," Tubbo whispered. "It's saying horrible things."

YOU THINK THAT IT IS HAPPENSTANCE THAT OF ALL YOUR FRIENDS, YOU WERE THE ONLY ONE TO LIVE? THAT YOU DIDN'T KILL THEM ALL?

Tommy gritted his teeth. "Ignore it," he urged. "It's a bitch."

"It's telling me that it's my fault Ranboo died," Tubbo whispered. Tommy shook his head and hauled him to his feet. "It's telling me that I was a bad friend."

DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOUR DESTINY IS, TOMMY INNES?

"Um, fuck off," he said, all but dragging Tubbo across the room. Movement flashed across his eyes, and he saw Technoblade in the doorway. "DON'T COME IN!" he screamed. "There's some sort of mind monster-thing!" Wow, maybe he should become a poet, or something, because he had talent at words.

Technoblade's eyes flashed with fear and then worry as he spotted the vines and Tommy pulling Tubbo across the vines. Every time Tubbo's feet brushed one, it sent up a bunch of spores that were painting the air red.

This could *not* be good for the economy.

YOU WERE LIKE CHROMA, YOU KNOW.

Tommy frozen. "What?" he whispered.

"Tommy?" Technoblade asked cautiously from the doorframe. Behind him, Tommy saw Sapnap and Hannah standing there, phasers drawn. Hannah's blood-red wings were bristling, but they couldn't do anything. Sapnap raised his phaser to fire at the Egg, but Hannah pushed his phaser down. Who knew what shooting it would do to the occupants of the room.

YOU *ARE* LIKE CHROMA.

"I AM NOTHING LIKE HIM!" he screamed. "HE'S A MURDERER!"

OH, AND YOU AREN'T?

"I am *nothing* like that fucking bastard," he cursed. "Fuck you."

YOU SENT YOUR FRIENDS TO DIE, TOMMY INNES. YOU KILLED THEM, EVEN IF YOU DID NOT PULL THE TRIGGER. THOSE DEATHS ARE ON *YOUR* HANDS.

"FUCK YOU!" he screamed.

"Tommy, don't listen to it!" Technoblade urged, clearly connecting the dots. His eyes were frantic, and his hands white from where they were clenched at his sides. He was clearly fighting the urge to enter the room. "It's all in your head, Tommy, come on—"

THE ARACHNIDS ATTACKED THE U.S.S MIDWAY BECAUSE OF *YOU*.

"No they didn't," he whispered. "I saw the report, it was because of the prisoner—"

YOU ARE THE LEADER OF THE CHILDREN'S REBELLION, AND FOUR OF THOSE CHILDREN ARE DEAD BECAUSE OF YOU. BECAUSE. OF. YOU. IT WAS YOUR ORDER. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR ACTIONS, TOMMY INNES. FOR YOUR SINS.

"Tommy," Technoblade said. He frowned, and then Tommy felt another presence in his mind, warm and comforting. The Egg felt like it took a step back.

WHAT IS THIS? THIS IS NOT ANOTHER AVIAN. THEY ARE ALL GONE; BURNED TO ASHES ON THAT ACCURSED PLANET OF THEIRS. ROCKS IN SPACE.

Tommy stared into Technoblade's eyes and saw family—saw love, saw *home*. And he took another step across the vines, dragging Tubbo with him. And another step.

YOU WERE ALWAYS BORN TO DIE, TOMMY INNES. THAT IS, AND ALWAYS WILL BE, YOUR DESTINY.

"Tell me something I didn't know," he muttered. One step at a time. Tubbo was still sobbing behind him, their hands clenched so tightly he felt like his wrist would break. He assumed that the Egg could talk to multiple people at once, and if it was, then while it was somehow trying to insult Tommy, it was telling Tubbo how worthless he was. Which was *not* standing well with Tommy. "Also, fuck off from Tubbo."

YOU ARE SUCH A BURDEN TO YOUR FRIENDS, TOMMY INNES.

Tommy paused, and looked at Techno; at the worried eyes of Sapnap and Hannah behind him; felt the love from his bond between him and Techno, and smirked. "Bullshit," he said, and then stepped into the waiting arms of his older brother.

Hannah was quick to slam the door behind them, and Sapnap was quick to start looking over Tubbo, brushing red spores from his hair with a disgusted look on his face. Tommy breathed a sigh of relief when the voice vanished, and Tubbo, although still looking shaken, looked like he had a clearer head.

"How long were you in there?" Tommy croaked.

"What time is it?" Tubbo whispered.

"About nineteen and a half hours," Hannah responded.

Tubbo winced. "Forty-five minutes?" He blinked, looking around. "Hey, where's Bad?"

"What?" Sapnap asked, his voice higher-pitched.

"Bad was with me," Tubbo frowned. "He was just here, I swear..."

"Shit," Tommy said, realization dawning on him. "Do you think the voice from the Egg made him go mad to attack Skeppy?"

"He *attacked* Skeppy?" Tubbo screeched.

"Voice?" Techno said harshly. "What did it say?"

"It told me everything bad that ever happened to me was my fault," Tommy said instantly.

"It said I was a horrible friend," Tubbo said in a small voice. "That I didn't deserve a place on the *L'manburg*." He winced. "And other things. I don't remember a lot of it."

"Do you think," Techno said slowly. "That listenin' to that voice for a while makes you go psycho and attack your friends?" He eyed Tubbo sharply.

Tubbo laughed dryly, but it wasn't very happy. "I don't think so, bossman," he said unhappily. "I'm not exactly feeling very murderous right now."

Techno looked at Tommy. "Me neither," Tommy said. "Just...cold."

"Let's get you to the medbay, then," Hannah said briskly.

Tommy groaned. "Aw, come on, man. I was having such a good streak, too..."

"Both of you," Hannah said.

"Women are scary," he grumbled.

Techno chuckled and ruffled his hair. "People are like that, bruh," he acknowledged. "Sapnap, Hannah, you can take them to the medbay. I need to call Phil to tell him to quarantine this hallway. Even if it isn't what made Bad...evil, for lack of better words, voices that say mean things into people's heads are still a no-go."

"Copy that, Commander," Sapnap drawled. "Come on, kids."

"You're four years older," Tommy complained.

"Yup, and four years wiser. Also your superior."

"Nobody is superior to me."

"Uh-huh."

Tubbo sniffed again, and Tommy sighed, deflating slightly. Hannah, phaser still in hand, dropped back to trail behind them as Sapnap led the frontal assault—like they were being escorted. Techno took out his comm and started saying something in a harsh voice through it. "You okay?" he asked his friend quietly.

"Dunno," Tubbo muttered. "Just thinking."

"That thing isn't right, you know," Tommy said sharply. *At least not for you.*

Tubbo eyed him balefully. "Isn't it?"

"It's not your fault Ranboo died."

"I should've gone with him," Tubbo whispered. "I should've done anything but sit there and be useless."

"You think I don't feel the same way?" Tommy asked. "I was *there*." Tubbo was silent. "I watched it happen, and I couldn't even fucking do anything."

"If I had been there—"

"Yeah," Tommy said, shrugging as he cut across his friend. "Maybe you could've stopped it. Chances are, he would've killed you first. Chroma isn't an idiot."

"Did you just compliment him?" Tubbo asked, frowning.

Tommy snorted. "I'm acknowledging my opponents," he said, quoting something Techno had said to him forever and ever ago. "That's the best way to defeat them. Chroma isn't stupid—far from it, actually."

"Yeah, you would have to be to murder three thousand kids."

Tommy swallowed. "Yeah. I suppose so. He knows you're a Shulker and probably have things hidden in your fourth-dimensional space."

For the first time since his 'rescue', Tubbo cracked a smile and twisted his wrist. A grenade appeared in it. "You got that right, bossman."

"Hey!" Sapnap shouted, swooping down on them despite the fact he didn't have wings. He grabbed the explosive from Tubbo. "Is that a fucking incendiary?"

"No, it's a toy," Tubbo said blankly, while Tommy dissolved into a coughing fit that had absolutely nothing to do with laughing.

Sapnap eyed it. "No, it's *not*."

"Whoops." Tubbo held out his hand. "Can I have that back?"

"No," Sapnap glared. "I'm confiscating this."

"Fine," Tubbo muttered, crossing his arms. "Buzzkill. *I* wasn't the one arrested for arson."

"I was sixteen."

"You set a house on fire."

"In my defense, I lost a bet with Dream."

"*Dream* doesn't have arson on his permanent record."

"You burned a house down and you have a job in the Galactic Rebellion?" Tommy said incredulously. "Where do they find you people? Jesus Christ."

"Come on," Hannah spoke up from behind them. "Half the people on this ship have criminal records." Tommy swung his head to look at her, horrified. She raised an eyebrow on them. "Petty theft, vandalism—"

"Who the fuck has vandalism on their record?" Tommy shouted.

"That would be me," Wilbur Soot said, materializing next to him, phantom-style. Tommy shrieked and swiped his knife at him, and Wilbur jumped back. "Hey! Careful with that!"

"Holy fucking shit, man," Tommy said, closing his eyes and willing his heart to calm down from that horrid scare. "You can't just do that."

"Well, I did, so cope."

"Then don't get surprised if someone cuts your throat," he scoffed. "What did you vandalize?"

Wilbur grimaced. "I drew a cock and balls on the side of a Walmart."

"You *what*?"

Wilbur threw up his hands. "Look, I'm not proud of it." Tommy snickered quietly, and Tubbo cracked a small, if teary, smile. "Hey! Shut up! At least I don't commit war crimes!"

"War crimes, s'more crimes," he said. "I don't draw dicks on the side of public buildings."

"One of those is far worse than the others."

"It was for the greater good," Tommy and Tubbo said at the same time, and then looked at each other, surprised.

"Oh, great, the children are ganging up on us," Wilbur muttered. He brightened. "Niki!"

Tommy jumped and hid behind Hannah, cowering behind her feathers. "I'm not here," he hissed.

"Tommy," Niki's voice said, and Tommy peeked over to see the short Merling medic frowning at him. "You know I can see your feet, right?"

"No!" he hissed, and jumped on Hannah's back. The Elytrian yelped in surprise. "I'm not here!"

"What did he do now?" Niki sighed, turning to Sapnap.

"I think he got his mind influenced by a talking egg," Sapnap drawled. "They both did." He gestured to Tubbo.

That threw Niki off a kilter. "They *what*?" She shook her head. "You know what, never mind. To the medbay we go."

"Nooooo," Tommy whined.

"Tommy," Niki warned sternly.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!" he yelped. Wilbur snickered under his breath, but as a testament to what he'd been through, Tubbo maintained his solemn expression.

"That's what she said," Sapnap muttered. Everyone, wisely, ignored him.

Purpled, Lani, and Drista met them in the medbay, right as Tommy was busy groaning about the hyposprays that Niki had injected him with—for 'safety', according to her. She was some devil incarnate, he swore. Death had come to haunt him in the form of a Merling doctor.

"I see you're dying," Purpled said in greeting.

"Fuck off," he muttered, glaring at Niki's back and rubbing his arm balefully.

"Don't glare at people, it's rude," Niki called over her shoulder.

"How the *fuck* did you—" Tommy cut himself off. "Never mind." She had some kind of telepathy, even if Merlings didn't have the ability to speak mind-to-mind—or maybe she was like one of those Terran owls and had eyes on the back of her head.

"What happened?" Drista spoke up. "Dream wouldn't let me enter the interrogation room."

"Rightly so," the only real adult in the room—Sapnap, Hannah, and Wilbur had left—said, shaking her head so her hair fell out of her face. "This isn't a child's game, Drista."

Drista scowled. "I ain't a child."

"Yes, you are," four voices chorused.

Drista scowled at the lot of them. "Traitors," she muttered.

"Section twenty-five C has been sectioned off," Purpled reported abruptly. "That's the science labs, right?"

Tommy swallowed, exchanging a glance with Tubbo, who lowered his eyes to stare at his feet where they were hanging off the cot. "The Egg thing got bigger."

"How much bigger?" Lani asked curiously.

"Big enough to telepathically scream into my head what losers we were," Tommy said, gesturing at Tubbo and himself and then crossing his arms. "Sort of creepy. Bad was there too, but Tubbo doesn't seem psychotic, so I don't think that's what caused him to go...mad." He grimaced. "At least I hope he's not acting like himself. That would be...bad." Tommy hesitated, and then snickered at his own unintentional joke.

"Funny," Purpled deadpanned.

"I am," Tommy said seriously.

Lani sat down next to her brother, looking sad. "You okay?" she asked him carefully. "Telepathic screaming into your head about how pathetic you are cannot be good for your mental health."

"No matter how true it is," Drista muttered.

"Excuse you," Lani retorted.

"It's okay," Tommy said brightly. "Pretty sure my mental health can't deteriorate any more than it already is."

"That's not the flex you think it is," Niki said, not sounding amused.

Tommy traded glances with Purpled, the Human boy expressionless in everything but his eyes, which glittered with the weight of the universe in them.

Chapter End Notes

both the co-author AND the author have the flu and were not able to triple-check for spelling errors.

Also, we will not be able to post the chapter next week due to finals happening -- gotta love junior year -- so sorry about that! (not sorry about the sort-of cliffhanger, though)

I've changed my mind, my mental health can, somehow, get worse.

*"Unless we remember,
we cannot understand."*

- E. M. Foster

Tommy woke up when a hand slapped over his mouth, not constricting his breathing with an attempt to suffocate him—no, his nose wasn't covered—but he somehow felt claustrophobic all the same.

He panicked wildly, reaching for the knife under his pillow, his heart accelerating nearly instantly to about a hundred and eighty beats per minute. He only didn't stab the person that had grabbed him because of the glint of magenta eyes from the dim nightlight in the corner of the room; a protocol in the medbay for safety. "What the—" he started.

"Shh!" Purpled hissed, and when Tommy took a second to look at his friend, he knew that he was dead serious. Or maybe seriously mentally unwell, because Purpled was in his room far too early in the morning. "We have to get out of here!"

"*What?*" Tommy hissed, when Purpled carefully removed his hand and raised a phaser—what the fuck, where had he gotten *that?*—squinting towards the closed door. Glancing at the bedside clock, Tommy determined it was about three in the morning, ship-time. "What the fuck is going on, Purpled?"

The Human gave him a long, drawn-out look that spoke a thousand words and none at all. "You know how the Egg affected Bad?"

"It did?" Tommy gaped. "Wait, what about Tubbo?" He patted his chest. "I'm not evil, right?"

"It doesn't affect those under twenty," Purpled said. Tommy breathed a sigh of relief. "Tubbo figured that out when Eret attacked him."

"Eret WHAT—"

"Shut *up*!" Purpled hissed again, slapping a hand over his mouth. Tommy winced and glared at him. "They're trying to kill us!"

"Who?" he demanded, clutching his knife a little tighter. Eret? Bad? Oh, God, please not Niki, he was terrified of her—

"All of them," Purpled said in a low voice, and Tommy cut off his train of thought to gape at him. "The entire fucking crew. Every last one of them."

Tommy stared at him, and Purpled looked back. There was desperation written on the face of his best friend; desperation and sadness and despair. "What do we do?"

"Drista, Lani, and Tubbo are in a saferoom," Purpled said. "I met up with them, and I volunteered to get you before Niki and—and Ponk got back from their little evil meeting in the cafeteria with the Egg."

"The Egg," Tommy repeated.

"It's like eight feet tall," Purpled said, and there was a cold prickle of fear that ran down Tommy's back at that statement. "Now come on—we have to go!"

Tommy got to his feet, the tile cold against his bare feet. "What room?"

"*The room*," Purpled said. "Our room."

Tommy swallowed, and thought of cold metal and a handshake and a promise to die together in the end. "Okay."

"You should—"

"Purpled, I swear to every fucking God in the goddamn universe, if you are telling me to run faster than you and leave you behind, you better fucking shut up and check yourself," he snapped.

Purpled fell silent. "Maybe you should follow your own advice," he said, thumbing his phaser. Tommy watched it go from *kill* to *stun*. He wondered if Purpled had ran into anyone in the halls to get to Tommy and killed them.

He never got the chance to ask, because Purpled led them into the dimly lit hallway. Neither of them spoke, and the only things that moved were them and the occasional flickering light.

What had been his home had become a horror movie come to life.

He was holding his breath, and he didn't realize it until Purpled's hand came down on his shoulder and he nearly gave them away by screaming at the top of his lungs. *Here lies Tommy Innes, killed by his friends*. How embarrassing.

Footsteps.

Purpled and Tommy ducked into the nearest corner, and now both of them were holding their breaths; praying that the person walking—whoever they were; they weren't Drista, because she walked like Dream; light steps that held a careful pattern, and it wasn't Lani, because Lani had a slight skip every third step, and it certainly wasn't Tubbo, because Tubbo had heavier steps that betrayed his every next move.

(When had he learned to memorize the gaits of his friends?)

Tommy's vision was getting foggy from lack of oxygen, and next to him, he could see Purpled's face was redder than it should have been, even with all the stress and anxiety that came with knowing your friends and family were trying to fucking murder you.

Purpled gave up first, letting out a gasping breath before he passed out, and the footsteps ten paces away *stopped*. Tommy's hands were shaking, and Purpled's face hardened resolutely before he leaned out of the alcove, raised his phaser, and pulled the trigger. The whistling noise filled the air, and then there was a sigh and a thud of a body falling.

His heart stopped.

"NO!" he screamed, leaping out of the corner.

Purpled let out a long hiss, and grabbed Tommy's hand. "RUN!" he shouted.

Tommy stared in horror at the slumped body of Hannah fucking Rose on the ground, her wings slightly twisted in a position that would soon strain them, if not break them—taboo among Elytrians. "You *killed* her!"

"I did not!" Purpled snapped. "She's only stunned, but everyone and their mother on this ship heard that, and we need to *go*!"

Tommy trusted Purpled with his life. He'd had to, and he'd do it again. Every damn time.

So he gathered up his courage and followed Purpled at a dead sprint down the hallways.

Twice more they spotted people—Finn the first time and Harvey the second time—and both times Tommy saw them lift phasers, only to miss their shots—and those were set to kill; he *knew* they were set to kill because he nearly got hit and felt the heat as the phase scorched his precious uniform. Perspiration ran down his forehead and down his back and down his neck and everywhere and nowhere and everyone he loved was trying to murder him—

"COME ON!" Purpled screamed, and Tommy shook his head and glanced over his shoulder and saw there were two people merely turns behind them, waiting for them to slip up, to mess up, and *this* was messed up, this was some kind of horrid nightmare, it *had* to be, because this couldn't possibly be happening.

He crashed into a solid body and went floundering to the ground, knife skittering to the side, and cursed Purpled's name before he realized the person he'd crashed into was taller and lankier and had brown hair and—

Tommy looked up and stared into the blood-red eyes of Wilbur Soot. The brown coffee-colored eyes he had come to love and recognize were gone; obscured by a crimson cloud that he realized was the exact same shade as the shell of the Egg.

Purpled came to a skidding halt up ahead, but his eyes went past Tommy and Wilbur and to the two adversaries that were now catching up—oh, God, that was Fundy and Spifey—drawing his phaser and ducking behind a sheet of metal in the hallway to fire at them—stuns against shots to kill.

"Wilbur," Tommy said—no, begged. Pleaded.

Wilbur's lips curved into a smile that was not his; was not anything like him at all—was hate and rage and victory all smashed into one, and Tommy had never seen such an expression on the face of a brother directed at *him*. His eyes shifted away from Tommy towards something on the floor, and Tommy saw exactly what it was heartbeats later.

The knife he had dropped.

They both dove for it at once; Wilbur with the snarling attempt to kill, and Tommy with the pounding heart, because he could not save himself *and* Purpled *and* Wilbur, as he tried to wrestle it away from someone that had become his *brother*—someone who was quite literally trying to stab him in the back.

"Tommy Innes," Wilbur snarled. "You must become one of **us**."

"GET OUT OF HIS HEAD, YOU BASTARD!" Tommy screamed, spit flying from his mouth, and was glad that it was Wilbur he was fighting, because from all his lessons with Techno, and occasionally Dream, and even getting beat up by Drista, helped him knock the knife out of Wilbur's hands and scramble away, ducking under the burn of a phaser blast going right for his head. He put in a burst of speed that made his chest hurt to make it to Purpled, who looked so relieved that it was almost forgettable that they had made a suicide pact all those months ago.

"I've already tried," Purpled hissed. "With Ponk and Punz. There's no convincing them."

"*What?*" Tommy cried. "You're just going to give up?"

Purpled didn't reply right away, raising his phaser to fire, and Tommy saw Wilbur vanish into thin air right as a stun would've gone through his chest. Instead, it flew through the place he had been and right into the sternum of Fundy, who had been standing in direct line of Fundy.

He collapsed like a rag doll, his face slamming messily against the metal floor to join Spifey, whom Purpled had already stunned. Tommy was pretty lucky he was friends with the not-evil guy who was obsessed with being perfect, because Fundy and Spifey had been proper horrid at shooting compared to him—which was fair, because one was a transport engineer and the other was a technical engineer.

He breathed out.

There were hands around his throat. A dazzling pain filled his head as he was forcibly slammed against the wall by a newly-reappeared Wilbur Soot, his expression furious—almost

like some sort of rabid dog. Tommy was dimly sure that Wilbur was also frothing at the lips too, but he couldn't quite say that was true for sure.

There had to be a joke buried in all of this. Maybe this *was* some sort of sick prank, and everyone was in on it.

Had to be, because this *couldn't be real*.

Hands squeezed tighter around his throat, and Tommy clutched Wilbur's hands and choked and kicked and found nothing but the all-encompassing pressure around his neck as the literal life was squeezed out of him by someone he considered *family*—and there was no realization; no stumbling back in horror, no *change* in Wilbur's expression—because he did not snap out of it.

And maybe Purpled had been right not to try with his brothers.

The Avian in him howled, beating at his mind to let it out, to stop Wilbur's heart, to do *anything* than allow this to happen, but Tommy could not bring himself to hurt his family.

Dimly, he wondered if Wilbur was watching, unable to do anything, behind a screen of red eyes as he was forced to watch himself kill his little brother.

Then Purpled came in with a yell and there was a splatter of blood and Wilbur *howled* and there was a hand on his arm that wasn't Wilbur's and they were running again—running away from a Phantom that had a knife buried in his back; a knife with a green hilt and had been a gift, long ago. A knife that had fallen from his hand and been picked up only to be used to stab the back of a *friend*.

Tommy struggled to breathe and run but Purpled didn't let up until they were in front of a door, and he realized he was spiraling somewhere horrible—somewhere he hadn't gone since his panic attacks after Ranboo's death—and then the doors were opening and there were the voices of two girls and another boy, and he recognized them but couldn't place it, and there were glittering lights of something he vaguely recognized as Phantom membrane—good, that would keep the Phantoms from phasing through the walls, that would keep—

—that would keep Wilbur from killing him.

"Tommy, I need you to listen to me."

Every memory he had ever made with the brown-haired Phantom bled and became tarnished with the horrible, unforgettable memory of blood-red eyes and a snarl on the face of a man that had laughed and ruffled his hair and sang softly alongside his guitar on nights they couldn't sleep.

Every single damn one.

Gone were the soft brown eyes; replaced with an angry red that burned with a god-awful fire of hatred. Gone was his brother, replaced by a monster that wasn't him at all. Gone were the soft brown eyes that Tommy had come to expect on Wilbur's face when he laughed and sang. Gone was the song; the melodies. Gone with his brother's sanity.

"Tommy, I need you to breathe."

"He's not breathing—"

"I know, I know—"

"Make him breathe!"

"I can't do that, he's stopping himself from breathing—"

"Oh my God, he's going to kill himself —"

There were hands back around his throat, fingers pressing bruises into the crevices made by his chin; hands tinged with calluses from bloodied hands playing the guitar, and all of it, all the force *he* had was intent on killing *Tommy*—

"GODDAMMIT, TOMMY INNES, YOU ARE THE MOST STUBBORN FUCKING PERSON I KNOW, AND IF YOU DON'T BREATHE THIS GODDAMN MOMENT I WILL KILL YOU MYSELF!"

And Tommy drew in a single, shuddering breath.

He opened his eyes and smiled.

"You can't kill me if I'm already dead, Purpled," he whispered, his throat hurting with every vibration—already he knew that fingertip-shaped bruises were showing up there, and he didn't need to touch his own skin to feel what Wilbur had done to him.

"Well, you're *not* dead," Purpled said fiercely, and Tommy's eyes swept across the small room, noting the abstract, almost random piles of dried food that looked like it'd been dumped here, a single med kit, part of an IV pole, some blood syringes—and the three others—Lani, Drista, Tubbo—all staring at him. Tubbo had a cut above his eye, but both girls appeared unhurt. Thank God. "Not yet, anyway." Tommy scoffed. "And we have a job to do."

"Do we?" he asked, tilting his head, and pretending he didn't have to fight to keep his voice even. "What is it?"

"The *L'manburg* is in warp," Tubbo spoke up, taking a step forward. "Heading towards the nearest Command structure. If it reaches there—if the Crimson—"

"The *Crimson*?" he demanded.

"The Egg," Lani said softly.

"Oh."

"If the Egg manages to infect that structure, we could lose everyone in the galaxy from that sort of virus," Tubbo finished. Tommy inhaled sharply, the movement making him wince. Lani noticed, and hurried over to the tiny med kit, digging out some painkillers in a small packet and tossing it to him. He caught it one-handed, and swallowed the two little pills dry.

"These won't make me drowsy, right?" he asked.

"No," Lani said.

"...thanks."

"Every person on this ship is trying to kill us," Purpled said, looking around. Tommy winced. "All of them, except for us five. Why?"

"Uh, because our lives are shit and unlucky like that and God decided *here's some more trauma* and yeeted it at us?" Drista suggested, speaking up for the first time since Tommy had entered the room. Her green eyes seem duller—wearier.

"Funny," Purpled deadpanned.

"Actually, we're not affected because our brains haven't finished fully developing," Tubbo said. "For Humans—" he looked at Drista and Purpled. "—human brains stop developing at around twenty-five. For Shulkers, that's around twenty-one. And for Avians—" he looked at Tommy. "Well, I don't actually know that one."

"They don't stop," Lani said.

"What?" Tubbo asked.

Lani shook her head. "That's what the research notes said that Niki bullied—I mean, obtained from the *Mira* said. Avians' bodies don't really stop developing until they're five years from death. That's how their biology works; the ones that give them the ability to... airbend."

Tommy rolled his eyes.

"If only we had a ship full of Avians," Purpled muttered.

"We don't," Drista said sharply. "There's only us five."

"Yeah, the last ship with a group of Avians on it was destroyed," Tommy pointed out. Everyone ignored him.

"We need to stop the *L'manburg* before it affects anyone else," Tubbo said. "Or else everyone in the galaxy is doomed to a life of mental slavery."

"Sounds fun," Tommy said sarcastically. "Is everyone okay, though?"

"Huh?" Lani asked, like she hadn't expected him to ask that. Which, rude.

Tommy tilted his head. "Like, you *made* it to this room, yeah?" Lani frowned at him. "But what did you have to do to make it?"

Silence.

Drista lowered her gaze, her hands shaking from where they were clasped in her lap. Tubbo clenched his jaw, but that was his only outward expression—ah, so he'd finally gotten good at

hiding his emotions, especially after Ranboo's death. Lani looked like she was going to cry, her small form trembling slightly.

"Wilbur choked me," Tommy said, reaching up and tugging at his collar. He hid the wince that his body wanted to take, as the back of his suit pulled at the bruised skin. "He wrapped his fingers around my throat and tried to squeeze the life out of me. Purpled had to stab him with *my* knife for him to leave us alone enough to end up here." Lani choked, tears overflowing from where they'd been trapped behind her lashes. Drista inhaled sharply. Purpled looked down at the ground—but Tubbo; Tubbo stayed looking at Tommy, his brown eyes fierce and angry. "So I'll ask again—who tried to kill you?"

"We don't have the time—" Purpled started.

"Yes," Tommy said. "We do." Some things you had to face in the past in order to face the present. He knew that lesson best of all. Purpled knew that too, and so he shut his mouth and didn't argue any further.

Tubbo held his gaze—easily, since Tommy was sitting down trying to pretend that his fingernails weren't digging little crescent moons into his palm; trying to pretend that his memories of Wilbur Soot weren't tainted by red eyes and a hissing voice that screamed *join us* .

"I was in my bedroom," the Shulker said finally.

"Tubbo, you don't—" his sister started, reaching out and putting her hand on Tubbo's forearm.

"No more secrets," Tubbo said, which was sort of ironic, as they were talking Tommy Innes, the literal king of Secrets-That-Were-Very-Important. "They could interfere with the mission." He raised his chin slightly. "No more lies."

"Mission?" Lani squeaked. "I'm not cleared for mission!" Nobody answered her.

"I was my bedroom," Tubbo said again. "Thinking. I was eating a granola bar—one of those peanut butter ones that taste like chalk-covered concrete." Purpled snorted slightly. "I set half of it aside, like usual." Tommy swallowed heavily at that one—they'd all seen Tubbo's nasty habit of splitting his food down the middle. Sometimes, when Tommy ate at the same time, or ate food Tubbo could eat, they split foods, but that was rare because if Tubbo split his food and left a gap between Drista and himself, they could all pretend that Ranboo just... wasn't there yet. Hadn't reached his destination. Hadn't entered the room. "There was a small trip to one of my alarms." He cut a glance at Purpled. "I, um, set traps. Not—not harmful ones. Ones that wake me up if someone's outside my door."

"I am aware," Purpled said calmly. Well, Tommy hadn't, but Purpled was the Quartermaster and kind of knowledge-hungry, so he'd be surprised if there were some going-ons on the ship Purpled *didn't* know about.

Purpled had seemed to know whenever he was about to commit suicide, after all.

Tubbo blinked. "Oh."

Purpled leaned forward. "I know a lot of things about the going-ons of this ship I shouldn't." Yeah, figured.

"Sounds ominous," Drista muttered. Purpled snorted.

"Anyway," Tubbo said, scowling a bit. "Someone was outside the door. But they didn't knock. And people don't just...hover. Not around my door. I got nervous—maybe I wouldn't have, if the whole Bad Egg thing hadn't happened."

"Bad egg?" Drista frowned.

"Bad, the Blazeborn, and the Crimson Egg," Purpled explained. "Not, like, a bad egg." He hesitated. "Funny joke, though." Drista nodded absentmindedly.

"I... I pulled out my taser," Tubbo explained, twisting his wrist so that a small square device appeared in his hand. "It has two firing cartridges." He smiles sadly. "I waited behind the door. When they opened it—it was Eret. I saw their red eyes and I fired my taser before I even had the chance to ask." He inhales sharply. "If he hadn't been controlled by the Egg, I don't know... I don't know what I would've done. They went down. I looked and I saw a phaser set to kill fall from their hands—and that's when I knew he would've killed me. So I loaded my last cartridge into my taser—I didn't grab the phaser; I've never been a good shot, though not for lack of trying. I went to Lani."

"I had been in the medbay," Lani continued softly, when Tubbo fell to silence. "I couldn't sleep. Not after the current going-ons. I just... I couldn't." She hesitated. "I was...I, um, I was reading one of Ranboo's medical journals on the properties of the common flu. His thesis, actually. I know it by heart, but I was reading it anyway. We were on edge—all of us, really, and when Clementine fell silent—"

"Clementine is shut off?" Tommy interrupted.

"I did that," Tubbo said. "If Clementine is on, the captain of the ship can get through any door." He shook his head. "That's the first thing I did. I shut off connection to her."

Lani dipped her head. For the first time, Tommy noticed her two space buns, usually neat and orderly, were slightly off-center. "Clementine went silent. Nobody was near me. I got scared. There was a noise in the corridor and I hid under the bed." She cut a glance at Purpled. "Ponk came in. He was looking for me. He seemed to know I was in there, but he wasn't acting like he knew me—he was careful, like I could've had a weapon, though anyone with their right mind knows I don't carry one."

"None of these people are right in their head," Purpled said.

Lani sniffed, scrubbing at her eyes. "He had a phaser. Again, set to kill. I've never been that terrified in my life—*ever*. I was cowering under a bed, waiting for a friend to find and kill me. I didn't know what I could do. I didn't know what I wanted to do." She let out a long, exhaling breath. "Some part of me would've rather let him kill me than kill him."

"Sometimes the person you'd take the bullet for is standing behind the trigger," Tommy said softly. Purpled gave him a sharp look.

"Tubbo shot him with a taser," Lani said hoarsely. "His final cartridge, I suppose. He said we had to go. I grabbed a med kit. Bandages. Other things within reach." She twisted her wrist as Tubbo had to access her fourth-dimensional space and withdrew a small bottle of pills. Tommy's eyes followed them curiously until the Shulker made them vanish. "We ran into Drista and Purpled in the hallway. Came here. Then Purpled went to rescue you."

"Purpled and I were sparring," Drista said. "We couldn't sleep either."

"Good to know I was the only one asleep," Tommy grumbled.

"You and Tubbo were sleeping because you'd been mind-fucked by a goddamn Egg that tried to infect and manipulate you and failed," Purpled pointed out.

"How concise," Tommy said, a thin smile on his face.

"Quite," his friend replied.

"We were sparring with swords," Drista said. She pointed at the corner of the room, and Tommy looked over to see two practice swords—blunt, but still metal—leaning against the wall. "Well, I was beating his ass."

"You're a child spy; you have more experience," Purpled retorted hotly, crossing his arms.

Drista smirked. "Sore loser," she said. "Anyway, Purpled got the notification on his datapad that Clementine was down because he doesn't turn it off like a workaholic—"

"Hey, my workaholicism saved our butts," Purpled said.

"I didn't say it didn't," Drista said lightly. "So then he got suspicious—"

"How sus," Tommy said.

"You've been spending too much time with Rae," Purpled told him. Tommy scowled at his friend.

"Purpled grabbed a phaser, which he isn't allowed to do but Clementine couldn't stop him because she's, you know, *shut off*, and we ran down the hallway," Drista said. Swallowed. "We quite literally ran into Quackity. I hit him on the head with my practice sword. There was a lot of blood." She looked at Lani, face twisting with worry. "Do you think I could have killed him?"

Okay, there was a lot to unpack there.

"How hard did you hit him?" Lani asked softly. "You'd need a lot of blunt-force trauma to kill a Human. You tend to have harder skulls than a lot of other races."

"Really?" Drista asked.

"Yes," Lani answered. She reached out and touched Drista's shoulder. "Where'd you hit him?"

Drista reached up and touched the side of her head. "Here," she whispered, and Tommy knew she was trying to stay strong even though she was scared. "What if I killed him, Lani?"

"Then it would be self-defense," Tommy said.

Drista glared at him. "I don't fucking care about the *law*, I'm asking about a friend!"

"Drista," Purpled said softly. "Please don't yell at Tommy. He's trying to help."

The Human girl deflated like an old balloon. "I'm sorry," she said wearily. "I'm... afraid."

"He didn't die from the original hit," Purpled told Lani. "He was groaning and rubbing his head, but down, when I looked back."

Lani looked relieved. "Let's hope his brain doesn't bleed out, then."

"But he has a chance?" Drista asked hopefully.

"A very good one," Lani said, smiling.

"Which is fortunate for him as a friend, and unfortunate for us as the hunted," Purpled said. He held his hands up in mock defense when everyone looked at him. "I'm just saying."

"Thanks," Drista said sarcastically.

"Okay, so the five of us are stuck in this shitty room," Tommy said, and Purpled snorted slightly—hopefully their little 'inside joke' would last a bit longer. "What do we do?"

"Right," Tubbo said. "We need to shut down the power of this ship, *soon*, or the entire fucking galaxy is going to die."

perspectives pt.1

Chapter Notes

I said that if Purpled & Tommy won MCC, I would post a chapter.

I regret this.

also tw mentions of medical procedures and blood idk if that's in the original warnings but yeah it's not awful but I wanted to give the warning anyway

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"Life comes from the earth
and life returns to the earth."
- Zhuangzi*

1. Purpled

"We cannot let them get off this ship." Tubbo had looked them each in the eye, his face deadly serious. "If even a sprig of that Egg gets off this ship, then everyone could get affected. The vines spread like viruses in the air, and feast on terror and pain. The pain inside our friends, our crew, is enough for the Egg to feast for a hundred years."

Purpled had thought of his brothers and wondered if they were slumbering or if they were somehow aware of what their alternative selves were doing. The latter was definitely worse than the first, although Purpled knew if they had switched places, he would rather be aware than asleep; knew that he would want to know the pain he was inflicting.

Maybe birds of a feather did indeed flock together, because, just like Tommy, he was hopelessly a hypocrite. He didn't want people he had come to love to know what they were doing to him. And yet, if he had been in their place, he would've wanted to know what he was doing to *them*.

Ah, he would endlessly be a hypocrite, wouldn't he?

"Purpled," Tubbo had said, and Purpled had blinked to show his surprise. *"You need to blow up the transports and disable the transporter."*

"Okay," he'd said. *"How?"*

Tubbo's eyes had glittered with what looked like the light of a thousand dying stars and had said simply, *"Bombs."*

It reminded him of something that had happened over a year ago; of fear and a group of Arachnids and a plan to blow up a warship.

He had never felt less like a member of the Children's Rebellion. He had never felt less like a friend; like a brother.

He had taken the group of grenades Tubbo had pulled out of his fourth-dimensional space—everyone held their tongue, and Tommy had scrunched his face up in a weird way, but nobody said anything—and had looked at them.

A small part of him had wondered what it would be like to pull the pin with nobody around and pretend that it had been an accident. A small part of him wondered what would happen if he was too near the explosion when it happened.

A large part of him knew that if he did not walk out of here alive, than someone else wouldn't either.

Tommy was, as usual, oblivious. His best friend was brilliant, sure—battle plans, speeches, making people feel better—but really, really stupid when it came to emotions. Tommy had the unique ability to sit with the gentle glow of a star wherever he was, receiving fond looks from his adoptive father and brothers, and the nonchalant roll of someone's eyes when he said something childish. Tommy also had the unique ability to lie when everyone knew the truth, and to pretend that his life was as flat and boring as the plains on Pogtopia had been; when in reality it was as mountainous and treacherous as the cliffs of Elytra.

Yes, he *was* a hypocrite. In one breath he'd grabbed Tommy's shoulders and told him not to kill himself, and then he'd turned around and dreamed about doing the same thing.

"Isn't splitting up, like, something we shouldn't do?" Drista had asked, her toxic green eyes testy and hard. She and Tommy were supposed to be staying back in the room, and she clearly looked like she loathed letting the others leave.

"This isn't a horror movie," he had said.

"Feels like one," Tommy had muttered. Purpled had thrown him a harsh look—now wasn't the time for jokes—but Tommy didn't appear to be joking, and cyan eyes met magenta, and Purpled silently inclined his point.

"Oh, this isn't going to end well," Lani had murmured.

"It's already shit," Tubbo had said. *"How much worse can it get?"*

Well, in Purpled's less-than-humble opinion, that there was one thing you should *never, ever* say. That, along with the words 'Chroma is a good person' and 'Tommy should be allowed in weapons room alone'.

Blacklisted phrases.

They had used an air vent to get out—Purpled had said that they shouldn't use the main door, because no doubt someone was camping it, even if the walls were Phantom-proofed. He and Tubbo. Two important jobs, one of which he was qualified for because he knew how to use grenades—which despite being full crew members, technically, the others did not—except Drista, but, well, she was a child soldier, and he didn't know *what* the Human girl might or might not know.

Oh, this was going to end *well*.

Purpled dropped out of the air vent, his hand clasped around his phaser. He knew that in a few minutes, it probably wouldn't work—if Tubbo succeeded, that was—but for now, it was breathtakingly nice, even if it was set to stun and his targets would be the people he'd called his friends for a very long time—the people that had rescued him from the Red Planet; from Pogtopia.

Philza Minecraft had seemed like some sort of angel, dark as his wings were. Purpled had looked up at him years ago and seen a savior.

Now everything was lost in an abyss of red and vines and words spat in anger—and he remembered the blood in his hands as he'd slammed the knife that he had gotten Tommy for his birthday into the shoulder of his Lieutenant, remembering to twist it just so for the most pain and the least damage. He could close his eyes and picture the bruises on the throat of his best friend, inflicted by a brother, and he could easily imagine Wilbur and Tommy switched with him and Punz—and that, right there, was why he did not mention to Tommy why he had not fought harder to get Wilbur off.

He wouldn't have either.

Purpled took a deep breath and stepped through the doors of the transporter room. Orange fur flashed, and Purpled raised his phaser and let off a single shot, the sound echoing loudly in the room.

Fundy—who outranked him, who was older than him by four years, and four years alone—went down in a pile of orange fur and crazed red eyes. Again. Purpled had literally already shot him once, not an hour earlier. Poor guy.

Not really. Purpled pretended he felt remorse, but it wasn't like he'd *killed* the Kitsune. Just, you know. Stunned him. Again. And stunning someone twice had adverse effects to the brain.

Oh, well.

Purpled took a second deep breath—had he only taken two?—and shot the transporter. He didn't bother to look back as harsh sizzling filled the air—it wouldn't blow, but it would be damaged enough that it would take days to fix. Coupled with Tubbo's part of the plan; the transporter would be damaged beyond repair unless either the Egg receded or the people did.

Nobody is going to leave, he thought viciously.

We rise as one, and we fall together.

2. Lani

She closed her eyes and suddenly she was under a table, hiding from a coworker in booted feet, wondering if this was where she was going to die, if this was it—

"Lani?"

She opened her eyes and looked at Drista, forcing a smile onto her lips. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not," Tommy called from where he was lying on the couch. Lani swallowed at his blatant callout.

"Lani, come on," Drista said quietly. "You know we have to do this. Niki has access to our vitals. We can't allow her this."

"Why not?" she asked thickly.

"Secrets are the most important part of war," Tommy said, his voice slightly muffled from where it was smashed into a pillow.

"You know," Drista said, turning to look at the blonde Avian. "You can be incredibly immature sometimes, and then turn around and be cryptic as fuck."

"I learned from the best."

Lani frowned. "Who?"

"Chroma, duh."

There were two collective winces at that. Tommy didn't seem to notice—but then again, his head was buried in the pillow.

Lani swallowed again, and raised the rag in her right hand. "We don't have any numbing solution," she said, sounding distant to herself.

What if Tubbo was dead right now? She wouldn't know for hours. What if he was lying in a pool of his own blood, choking to death? What if she could save him, and she wasn't there to?

"That's fine," Drista said. "I can take it." She narrowed her eyes. "You're not going to kill me because you're distracted, right?"

"I'm more professional than that," she responded instantly, and then thought of her hands covered in the blood of a friend, of Drista's brother—staining her elbows in a viscous liquid that looked like red ink; Niki shouting—

—would Niki ever shout at her again?

"Hey," Drista whispered to her, and Lani blinked again, this time blinking back tears. "Focus on the present, yeah?"

"Yeah," she said, her throat thick with tears. She adjusted her grip on the scalpel—thank goodness she always carried one in her *Torak-Khogari*, just in case. Drista proffered her wrist again, and Lani caught it with her gloved hand, turning it upwards to face the light of the lamp so blue and green veins were visible—and a small dark shape, maybe half an inch across, showed Lani exactly where to cut.

She had made many incisions in her life, most of them on practice and training dummies. A few times she'd done it on real people, with Niki guiding her in the background, her voice low and reassuring.

All of the people alive had been on either anesthesia or local numbing solutions. None of them had born the full brunt of the pain.

Lani took a deep breath. Drista mirrored her. She tightened her grip on Drista's wrist. "Don't flinch," she voiced, an echo of a Merling that hovered too much and loved too greatly. "I don't want to cut your radial artery." She can already see what she has to avoid—she can see that specific artery running through Drista's wrist, deep purple in color.

She did not have the tools to fix that if she cut it.

Lani raised the scalpel and made the cut. Drista winced, but her body did not mirror her face, and Lani paused, her knuckles white around Drista's wrist. Pain flared in the green-eyed Human, but she locked gazes with Lani and forced a horrific grimace. Lani, left hand still wrapped around Drista's wrist, put the scalpel down on a tissue—best they had, unfortunately—and grabbed the pair of forceps lying next to it. They were just about the only medical tools she had; besides the miniature kit for stitches and a few Band-Aids.

She didn't have a dermal regenerator to fix this, or a protoplaser; just her bare hands and her medical training and knowledge.

Drista winced again when she touched the cold metal of the forceps against her skin, and Lani had to give her a sharp look—she did feel bad for doing it, unlike Niki—in order to get her best friend to cross her legs and sit still.

"Here," Tommy said, and Lani nearly jumped, which would have been bad, seeing as she had a goddamn piece of metal in her best friend, fishing for a tracker that would hide them from their friends. Tommy had a piece of his uniform held out; the thick belt part that tucked the upper half.

Drista eyed it. "Is this some sort of kink thing?" she asked.

"*What?*" Tommy yelped. "No, you fuckin' weirdo! It's for you to bite down on!"

Drista snickered, but her face was slightly white, and she took the belt and laid it in between her teeth—which, now that Lani saw it, was helpful because her lip was bleeding from worrying it.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I should've thought of that."

"It's okay," Drista said, though it sounded more like, "Ifs ohay."

Lani took about two more seconds to remove the small device, holding it up against the lamplight to make sure it hadn't splintered in Drista's body—it hadn't—and checking the wound one more time before she looked at Tommy, who was hovering nervously, hand rubbing over his own forearm. "Tommy," she said, trying to maintain a level of calm. "Can you go wash these out in the sink in the bathroom?" He nodded and took them—thank God this place had a small half-bath attached—and Lani let go of Drista's wrist in the meantime. Drista groaned slightly, and Lani stared at the blood on her gloves and wished she had more to spare, because she couldn't exactly replace them right now without wasting them. "I hope you don't mind your own blood on you."

"We 'ave 'eria," Drista said, and Lani squinted at her. Drista spat out the belt to the side. "We have periods. Even if they're a bit different per species."

"Right," she said. Tommy was back in the room, now, and he handed her the tissue forceps. They weren't as clean as she'd like; they weren't sterilized or anything, but she couldn't really do anything about that, could she? Lani grabbed her needle driver, scissors, and a sterilized needle and thread—the needle she would have to throw out; fortunately, the kit had about a dozen just in case it broke or something.

Remember the steps.

She'd learned them, but she'd never had to actually stitch by hand. That was old, and newer tech had all but replaced it. She was fortunate that she'd learned it; it wasn't required for nurses, but *was* required for nurses aboard exploratory vessels like the *L'manburg*.

Remember the steps.

Okay, step one. Grab the needle driver; make sure it clamps the needle in place. She was doing the most simple suture—interrupted stitches. She could do this.

Step two. Use the tissue forceps to expose the side of the wound that will be stitched. Drista hissed a little bit at the pain, and Tommy bent down and handed her the belt she'd dropped. She took it thankfully and pressed it between her teeth. *Line up the edges of the wound.*

Step three. About a centimeter to the right of the wound, push the needle in at a ninety-degree angle .

"FUCK!" Drista shouted through her pseudo-mouth guard. Tommy winced at her pain, his hand going back to rub the spot on his own skin that Lani would need to remove next.

Step four. Twist your hand clockwise so that the needle starts coming up on the other side of the wound.

"Fuck, bitch, *fuck me*," Drista said, her leg kicking up slightly. Lani looked at Tommy, and the Avian, though pale, nodded and pressed his hands to her knees, keeping her from kicking Lani and potentially ruining this. "FUCKING—"

Step five. When the needle has come out on the other side of the wound, unlock the needle driver, reattach it near the tip of the needle, and pull until you have about one or two inches of thread left on the right side of the wound. Release the needle.

"You heartless son of a *goddamn* bitch," Drista said, spit flying from her mouth. There were tears on her face, and her arms were shaking slightly.

"It's okay," Tommy said. "You're not going to die."

"Jesus Christ, would you hurry the fuck up—"

Step six. Make the 'first throw.' Using her left hand, Lani held the threat on the left side of the needle and wrapped it twice around the tip of the needle holder. She opened the needle holder slightly and grabbed the little bit of thread still on the right side of the wound, and, using her left hand, pulled the long part of the thread. She watched with joy and relief as the part of the thread wrapped around the needle holder slid off, creating a simple overhand knot with two loops.

"Jesus," Drista groaned. "How many more do we have?"

"I'm not done with the first one yet," she replied, holding the long end of the thread and wrapping it again around the needle driver, chanting *clockwise, clockwise, clockwise* in her head. She opened the needle threader again and grabbed the short end of the thread, and pulled the long part of the thread again with her left hand, finishing off the surgeon's knot with a second overhand knot. Then she did it again, for the 'third throw'—couldn't hurt to be safe, especially since Drista was the type to itch it—instead wrapping the thread counter-clockwise around the needle driver, instead of the previous clockwise.

"Holy shit," Drista said. "You suture like my grandma."

"Your grandma is dead," Lani pointed out.

"Hurry up!" Drista shrieked. "Are you sure you're not taking my arm off?"

Tommy snorted. "It's like an inch long," he said scathingly.

Lani pointed the needle driver at him. "Don't you go making fun of her, Thomas Innes," she said. "You're next."

Tommy blanched. "You sound like Niki."

Lani felt a smirk cross her face.

She scowled, rubbing at the four stitches currently marking its way angrily across her wrist.

"Don't itch it," Lani called, although her back was facing Drista, so Drista didn't really know how that slip of a girl could *possibly* know she was touching the cut. She scowled again, dropping her hands at her sides.

"FUCK!" Tommy shouted.

"You scream like a girl," Drista drawled, stepping closer in time to see Lani slotting her weird needle tools through Tommy's identical cut.

"Yeah?" Tommy said through gritted teeth, grimacing heavily at Lani, who didn't seem to notice. "What's wrong with that? Some of the strongest people I know are girls." Drista puffed up her chest. "Like Niki. And Alyssa."

"You said know," Drista pointed out. "Alyssa is dead." Lani hissed and swatted her with her elbow, because her hand was currently covered in both Human and Avian blood.

Tommy snorted. "Kristin, then."

"Not me?"

"You're a—MOTHERFUCKING—bitch," Tommy said, his voice cracking in the middle of his sentence as Lani jabbed pointedly at her wound. Cruel, cruel girl. "Fuckin' hell!"

"And you called me a bitch before," Drista said, grimacing at the remembrance of the stabbing pain. She glanced over at the chip, which lay innocently on the tray next to Tommy's blood-soaked one.

"You *are* a pussy," Tommy said. There were tears in his eyes. "These are allergies."

"You have no allergies in the system," Lani said coolly.

"I have—OW, FUCK—meat, innit?"

"That's not an allergy; that's a biological byproduct of your digestive tract," Lani replied. Drista snickered. "Your body can't handle breaking down the stuff meat is made of."

"Stuff?" Drista asked, raising an eyebrow. "You're losing your touch."

Lani frowned at her. "I'm a nurse, not a nutritionist. Go talk to Karl if you want to learn about the food pyramid."

"I would," Drista said. "But I think he'd try to kill me." Her brother's face came to mind—green eyes turned red—and she pushed it out. She couldn't afford to think about that right now.

"Maybe that wouldn't be so ba—FUCKING HELL, WOMAN—"

"Your yelling is making my needle angry," Lani said. "Stop doing that."

Tommy paused. "Is it?" he asked weakly, and Drista fought to keep a straight face.

"Yes," Lani deadpanned.

Tommy was silent for the rest of the session.

4. Tubbo

He wiped his sweaty palms against the cloth of his uniform before palming a grenade into his hand—as his uncle had once said; you could never have *too* many bombs in your *Torak-Khogari*. Tubbo had a few nuke codes too, but he wasn't about to tell anyone that outright—most people thought he was joking.

Tubbo glanced up when the lights flickered suddenly, and felt a reign of calm fill him knowing that Purpled had succeeded at least one of his two tasks—he could tell the shaking of bombs going off like he could recite the ingredients in a Molotov cocktail.

The engine room, where Finn, Vurb, and Spifey—the engineers aboard the *L'manburg*—spent the majority of their time, was fortunately quiet, save for the blinking lights of various machines. He crept along the passageways, praying that someone wasn't about to jump him, because he didn't have a weapon.

A small hiss of gas made him jump slightly, but he relaxed when he realized it was just the antimatter reaction chamber, near the structural support and the anchoring framework for the connecting dorsal and the warp nacelle pylons.

He had to turn the power off.

No power meant no warp. Meant they were stuck in space. He couldn't blow it up—that would, like, blow up the entire fucking ship—but he had to disable it long enough so that the evil versions of the engineers couldn't find a way to fix it for at least a few days.

Tubbo had to buy everyone time.

His stomach gurgled, reminding him of the nearing breakfast time, and Tubbo hissed under his breath, thinking of the half ration bar that he could potentially bring out.

He wouldn't, though, despite it being the only food he had. After all, it was the last thing Ranboo had given him—half a bar of the shitty, horrid food that was ration bars, and he'd put it away in disgust.

Ration bars never got moldy, but it had long expired past its opening date, and sometimes Tubbo would turn it in his hands when nobody was around, wondering if he would ever finish a full plate of food again. Eret had tried to talk to him about it, mentioning something about trauma and how it affected eating, but Tubbo had subsequently ignored him and they'd never brought it up again.

Tommy noticed a lot. Tommy split lunches and dinners with him when he thought Tubbo wasn't looking, and it helped, it did, but neither of them mentioned it and Purpled would sigh and everyone would go back to pretending there wasn't a fucking gap on the bench between Tubbo and Drista and that Ranboo...was never going to fill that space again.

Disable the power. That's all he had to do. Force the ship on emergency power, which included backup lighting, life support, and not much else. Definitely did not include phaser charging—they would power off—and would turn off the warp drive.

Disable the fucking power.

There! The control panel!

He could do this.

He could pretend that Ranboo wasn't dead, that his friends weren't trying to desperately murder him, that the voice from the Egg didn't haunt his every waking thought—that some

part of him had wished that the mind control had worked on *him* so he didn't have to do awful things like this.

Just so that for *once*, the weight wasn't on his shoulders.

If he could pretend all those things, then he could turn a few buttons on the control panels.

Tubbo took a deep breath, and then set to wrecking the *L'manburg*, wincing at every hiss of steam, every warning that crossed the screen, and every loud beep that echoed across the empty engine room. Fortunately, while they *had* removed his control access, Tubbo could splice his way into the system, and he used his datapad to do so, just like he had done in the Wasteland prison a million years ago.

After all, he had been there when the firewalls had been constructed. He knew how to take them down.

And with every line of code, Tubbo could feel the *L'manburg* come closer and closer to the screeching halt that it would eventually, once he powered down the warp cores. It almost hurt, to break the place he called home—even if he knew, internally, that it could be fixed.

This was a temporary solution to a long-term problem. Thankfully, Tubbo had always been good at those.

*Confirm that you would like to shut down all external power to
[ExploratoryVessel:L'manburg] ?*

[► Yes]

► No

Confirmation Affirmed.

➤ *Set password?*

[➤ Yes]

➤ No

*Please enter a password. Only when this password is entered can power be restored, unless there is an **[Admin]** in the system.*

➤ *****

Confirm password?

➤ *****

Password confirmed.

*To guarantee that **[User: TU880]** would like to shut down all primary power, please pull the blinking lever.*

There was the scrape of a boot on the floor.

Tubbo jumped, spinning around, his breaths quickening. His eyes first found the confirmation lever that the system was speaking of—ten paces away, and directly to the left of the person that was blocking his path.

Pink hair, small curling tusks, a scar...

Technoblade.

"Tubbo," Technoblade said, his lips curling into a sneer that was very unlike him—Tubbo didn't think he'd ever seen that emotion on his face, ever, except when Tommy had described Techno after Ranboo's death and his subsequent torture. "A pleasure to finally meet you, boy."

Tubbo raised his chin and tried to pretend that his eyes were not drawn to the lever next to Technoblade's hand. He placed a hand on the control panel behind him and shut it off, deleting his work—but the lever stayed blinking, and if he could pull it down, then he could complete his mission. "Who am I talking to?" he demanded because it sure wasn't Techno.

Techno stepped a foot forward, and Tubbo pretended there wasn't a sheen of sweat dotting his forehead. Techno didn't have a phaser, but he did have one of his old fencing swords—real ones, not like Drista's practice ones—in his hand, and Tubbo would actually rather die by getting shot than that monstrosity.

What did he have in his *Torak-Khogari* that could be helpful?

Bombs were soothing, sure, but if he blew up the engine room he blew up the *L'manburg*, and, well, he sure as fuck didn't want to do that. At least, not with people onboard.

When he'd taken his negotiation classes for the Command pathway, he'd been taught to stall for aid from a psychologically unstable enemy. But nobody knew he was in trouble, and yeah, Technoblade *was* fucking unstable. And going to kill him.

"Who do you think you're talking to?" Technoblade asked, and Tubbo pretended he didn't notice the glint of the dim lights against his blade.

"Um... my best buddy, and best pal, Technoblade?" he tried, and oh, God, he sounded like Tommy.

"Nice try," Technoblade said.

"Listen," Tubbo said, holding up his hands placatingly. "I don't want to hurt you—"

"Well, I kind of want to kill you because you're ruining all my plans."

Tubbo swallowed. "And, uh, what are your plans? For, uh, no reason."

Technoblade blinked at him. "Universal domination," he said simply. "What's one ship to a thousand worlds of intricate life?" He took a deep breath. "These people are so...boring."

"Yeah, how about you let them go, then?" Tubbo said, hating how his voice seemed to have gained about four octaves. He didn't want to kill, hurt, or maim Techno. He didn't want to blow up the *L'manburg*.

Technoblade laughed. It sounded wrong. "Sorry, Tubbo. They're necessary to spread my seed."

"That's what she said," he said, and winced. *Wow, real mature, Tubbo. Good one.*

"I do not comprehend," Technoblade said slowly. "What are you trying to communicate?"

Tubbo grinned nervously. "And that's what's different between you and me, Mr. Egg," he announced. "I can make sex jokes. And you won't ever understand them."

Then he withdrew a boomerang from his *Torak-Khogari* and chucked it at Techno's head.

Chapter End Notes

golly gee I love cliffhangers!

perspectives pt. 2

*"A friend is one who knows you
and loves you just the same."*

- Elbert Hubbard

4. Tubbo

Tubbo regretted many things in the short time he'd been alive.

He regretted ignoring his parents, and he would never know if they would regret their snide comments because he wouldn't go into Medical like them and Lani. He regretted telling them he hated them, even if it was partially true. He regretted the slight feeling of relief that had trickled through them when he had learned they were dead, followed immediately by the awful sense of being a horrible person for feeling that. He regretted distancing himself from his parents because, in the many books about child-parent relationships that he'd read, most teens would become friends with their parents well after adulthood. Most, but not all—obviously, some parents went way out of line and never deserved to be parents nor be forgiven.

Tubbo's parents, no matter how snide their comments, no matter how haughty they acted, had paid for his schooling and his lessons and his uniforms and provided for him in every way save emotionally. He had never been a jealous person, per se—not like Purpled—and he'd never been jealous of the boasting and the gift-showering that his parents had shown Lani.

He'd known from a young age he was some sort of genius, and the many tests and early entrance to Fleet school had shown that. Graduating early, becoming the youngest member in the Command track, becoming the Chief Operations Officer for the *L'manburg*—all of that were goals he had set himself and met. He had found friends, family, and a home, eventually when his parents had died at fourteen.

Maybe he was replacing his parents in Phil and Kristin, even if he wasn't officially adopted by them like Tommy. He'd never wanted for that sort of thing, and now that he was eighteen, he was supposed to gain custody of Lani whenever they got back to Terra.

Well, *if* they got back to Terra.

Another thing he regretted was telling Tommy that he'd rather have him dead than Ranboo. No matter how many times he'd apologized and would again in the future, it would never change the fact that he had *said* that, in anger and desperation and sorrow, and some part of him had meant that. No matter how many words he said, it would never change the fact that sometimes he would catch Tommy looking at him, a haunted look on his face, and know that Tommy would rather himself and Ranboo have switched places too. That hurt too.

All he knew was that he'd said it, and Tommy had left before he could finish the sentence, the words helpless and unyielding of any sick sort of peace, and he had lain there on his back and wondered if Tommy would come back from wherever he was going, especially with Clementine off.

Tommy *coming* back—and none of the crew mentioning anything out of the ordinary—was not something that Tubbo had expected, but he had held his tongue because he didn't deserve to be Tommy's friend anymore. *Tommy* didn't feel like that—*how lucky he was to have someone to forgive him for his wrongs*—but then again, Tommy had always been too trusting. As much as Tubbo had criticized Purpled for his morals, both in public and in private, Tubbo knew that for Purpled, Tommy *always* came first—no matter what laws he would have to break and what morality he would have to shatter to get Tommy to live.

No matter what, for Purpled, Tommy came first. Everyone noticed it. The Human boy wasn't exactly subtle. Tubbo had first realized this odd circumstance in the bathroom when Purpled had been berating Tommy for being in denial, and Tubbo had accidentally found out that Tommy Innes had been the leader of the Children's Rebellion on the Red Planet.

That had been a day. He'd expected the leader to be older. He'd expected him to be more mature all the time. He'd expected quite literally anyone *but* Tommy, but maybe that was why nobody else found out until it was almost too late.

Maybe he was jealous. Maybe.

Maybe he was jealous that what Purpled and Tommy had was something he would never have again, not with what Chroma had done. Not with Ranboo murdered. Maybe he hated himself just a little for wanting what they had. Those two had gone through heaven and hell just to *talk* to each other—nobody liked the Red Planet's Genocide. Nobody liked talking about the children brutally murdered and then those of the Children's Rebellion that had fought so hard for a freedom that only one had ever really had; what with Tommy getting locked up in the Wasteland afterward, and Ranboo gaining memory loss.

And then maybe there was one thing more that Tubbo regretted.

And maybe that thing was never sitting down and telling his friends and family that he loved them.

For there was nothing certain in life save death.

5. Tommy

He was scratching the stitches that Lani had completed only minutes earlier when he felt the tick in the back of his head. Not a *real* tick, like the Terran bug that Dream complained to

Sapnap about getting stuck on his arse one time, but the little itch that he got when Rae was close enough that she'd accidentally send some of her stress through the bond they shared.

Tommy shot to his feet, and Lani let out a small yelp from where she'd been scrubbing her hands with baby wipes, the small pile of red-speckled cloth sliding off the table. Drista jerked her head up from where she'd been turning her practice sword around in some sort of vigorous spinning fashion.

They were all a bit on edge, admittedly.

"What?" Drista demanded, rising to her feet as well. "What's going on?"

Tommy waved a hand at her, tilting his head. "Shush!" The Human girl scowled at him but crossed her arms and fell silent. He closed his eyes and felt his way towards his two closed bonds—one of which he'd completely forgotten about due to stress. Rae was dark-silent, which meant she was too far away to contact, though he could tell by the slight glimmer she was alive—but Techno's felt... sickly. Infected. *Wrong*. At first glance, it seemed normal, but when Tommy prodded at where the itch was originating from, he jerked his mental hand back like he'd just touched a hot iron.

Blood.

KILL HIM, FOOL!

Blood for the—

KILL HIM!

Tommy panicked at the multitude of voices, one of which incredibly overwhelmed the other—the Egg was *in* Techno's head; that was how it controlled him. Which didn't make sense because, in Tommy's opinion, Techno had a pretty strong mental fortitude, and *Tommy* had talked to the Egg, but maybe his depression somehow overrode the harsh words the thing had spat at him.

He took a breath.

"Tommy?" Lani asked. Faint, as if she was far away.

Who did the Egg want Techno to kill?

He took a second breath.

"Tommy!" That was Drista, though she also sounded like she was across a field and shouting from a distance.

He prodded the small knot that was the closed bond he had with Techno, but this time he expected the wave of boiling *red* he got from it.

Little avian!

WHAT IS THIS?

Aww, Tommy!

HOW ARE YOU HERE? IMPOSSIBLE.

"Get *out* of his head," he snarled at the Egg, ignoring the coos of the Voices—so that was what Techno had meant. Well, they were calmer than the Egg, at least.

If he had a nickel for every time Techno had been controlled by voices in his head, he'd have two nickels, which was weird that it happened twice.

YOU DO NOT CONTROL ME, TOMMY INNES.

"You're right," he said forcefully, grasping for the source of the maggot in his brother's mind. "I don't. *Get. Out. He's mine.*"

YOU DON'T OWN HIM.

"You don't either."

I THINK I DO, ACTUALLY.

There was a flash of smugness that wasn't entirely human—or not Human at all, actually; it felt vaguely alien-like, which made sense, because it was definitely the Egg that was conveying that emotion. If alien mind-controlling eggs could feel emotion. Then the Egg was pushed aside as one of the voices hissed at him.

It's funny how no matter who you are; female, male, child — we all bleed in the end.

Then Tommy saw a flash of brown eyes, the metal ducts of the engine room, and felt the taste of copper at his lips. He gasped, pulling out and slamming a wall between himself and the bond he shared at Techno.

"Tommy!" Lani screamed, and he blinked himself back into existence. The Shulker girl had tears streaming down her face. "You just—did you just have a seizure?"

"No," he said instantly, and looked at Drista. "We need to go."

"*What?*" Lani cried. "Go where?"

"Engine room," he said shortly, and both girls paled rapidly. "Tubbo's in trouble."

"I'm coming too," Lani said.

"*No*," he said. "Someone has to live, Lani."

"He's my brother!" the girl screamed.

"We don't have time to argue!" he roared back at her, regretting it slightly when she cringed. "You don't have the lung capacity to run that far! If we don't leave now, Tubbo's going to *die!*" He was turning around before an answer had even dropped from both Drista and Lani's lips, striding to the door and unlocking it with his fingerprint.

"Wait—" Drista started.

The door slid open, and Tommy came face-to-face with the red-eyed, surprised face of one Sapnap. He had a phaser in her grip, but it was held loosely like he hadn't expected Tommy to open the door. Which, yeah, he probably hadn't.

Tommy admittedly hadn't thought this far ahead, and stood there stupidly as the Blazeborn raised the phaser, the surprise fading from his face and twisting into a mask of rage that wasn't like him at all. He probably would've died, too, if a wink of blonde hair and metal hadn't flashed by him, a loud battle cry leaving her lips. There was a slight *thunk* that made Tommy wince as Drista swung her dull, but still metal, practice sword and collided it with Sapnap's head.

"Did you *kill* him?" he demanded, his voice rising about four octaves.

"No, you idiot," Drista snapped, stepping past him into the hallway. Tommy looked from her to the fucking crumpled body on the floor, and cringing at the trickle of blood that was running down Sapnap's temple. "I didn't hit him that hard." She paused. "I think."

Tommy probably would've argued with her more, but Tubbo's brown eyes and the taste of blood on his tongue made him reconsider, and he turned to look at Lani, who was hanging in the doorway. "Close the door," he ordered. "Do not open it unless you hear three knocks, okay?"

"I—" Lani started.

"Bye!" he said, giving her no time to reconsider her thoughts and racing off down the hallway, Drista at his heels. A small part of him gleefully shouted at the adrenaline pumping through his veins, and he squashed that part of him down and pretended that his worry for Tubbo wasn't world-endingly significant.

He was an Avian, and he was born to run, and so he ran like his life depended on it—because although *his* didn't, Tubbo was facing down a feral half-Piglin that had the second-highest accuracy firing in the shooting range and could easily beat three people in hand-to-hand combat.

In short, Tubbo was fucked, unless he decided to blow the entire *ship* up using his assortment of bombs. Tommy didn't think he would do that, though.

Key word being *think*.

He realized he was faster than Drista when he started hesitating more and more at corners, waiting for the Human to catch up. She noticed at the fourth one, her cheeks flushed from the running, and she panted out, "*Go*."

Tommy didn't argue. It was quite literally a matter of life and death, after all. Still, he hated to leave her behind, though quietly, he had to admit that she could probably defend herself the best between the five of them not infected.

It had never taken him so long to get to the engine room. It had never taken so long to get *anywhere*, except maybe when he'd first boarded the *L'manburg* and taken the elevator down to meet Purpled. Time waited for no one. Time had a fantastic way of showing him what really mattered.

Maybe his deck of cards had finally given him a good hand because nobody was between him and the engine room. Maybe the universe had decided that there was something for him to see in here.

Instead of taking the stairs down to the engine room, he landed in a roll and swore something cracked under the pressure, the flash of pain in his foot probably something he should be worried about. Tommy pushed open the door with a slight huff—and paused, hand on the door.

The engine room was dim, and he blinked, a memory rising to the forefront of his brain. He had avoided the engine room in every ship he had been in since the incident of the *U.S.S Midway*. He had avoided it because the last time he had ventured into a place nearly identical to this—most engine rooms were standardized; though the *L'manburg*, being an exploratory vessel rather than a transport, had extra stuff that Tommy couldn't even begin to explain—the last time he had been here, he had been helpless to watch as a friend of his had sacrificed her life for hundreds of others. He had held her in his arms as she had died.

Say hello to the stars for me, Tommy.

"GET AWAY FROM ME!"

The spine-curdling shriek ripped Tommy out of his memories, and he jolted, moving forward out of instinct as Tubbo's voice ripped through the air, ruining any hope that he'd had of the Shulker being fine. He bolted around the warp core—or what he thought was the warp core, anyway—and skidded to a halt, fear spearing him like a fisherman at sea.

While Wilbur had slammed him against the wall and had suffocated him until he had nearly passed out, he had been terrified for his life as he had gasped for air that wouldn't reach his lungs.

Now, he felt like he couldn't breathe again, but it wasn't because someone was cutting off his airflow.

It was because he had rounded the corner and he had seen Tubbo on his back and Technoblade, a very *real* sword in hand, standing over him. As Tommy watched, Tubbo rolled to the side, getting to his feet and just narrowly missing being fucking *decapitated* from the swing of the Commander's weapon.

"TUBBO!" he shouted.

Tubbo turned towards him, brown eyes meeting his. In the split second that they locked gazes, Tommy could've sworn he saw a little bit of relief there as the Shulker reached for a handle on the machine behind him, pulling it down.

Tommy felt more than saw the *L'manburg's* power supply get cut off as the ship defaulted to emergency power, the lights shutting off and plunging the entire room into darkness. He was thrown against the nearest flat surface as the ship exited warp suddenly, but fortunately managed to get a hand up to stop his head from slamming against it before he got a concussion.

There was a bit of silence in the darkness, and Tommy drew a single, shuddering breath from where he was crouched on the floor, his injured hand—the one he had used to catch himself—screaming in pain.

Then the emergency power flicked on, the reserve bulbs burning a gentle red and bathing the room in scarlet light. A thousand warnings beeped and dinged throughout the room, indicating damage on a hundred things that Tommy didn't know the names of due to the sudden stop in space.

From three hundred thousand kilometers a second to a complete stop.

Tommy looked up towards the other two figures bathed in the red emergency lights. Tubbo was facing him, one hand braced against the wall.

He looked behind Tubbo just in time to see Techno stab Tubbo through the chest.

Right through the gut.

There was no sudden scream, no yelp of pain. There was a breath, and Tommy locked eyes with Tubbo and saw *acceptance* there.

And then the Shulker collapsed.

Tommy stood ten paces away from the half-Piglin, half-Feline that had just run a sword through his friend's chest, and wondered whether the universe was playing some sort of sick joke on him.

"How disappointing," Techno said, and it didn't sound like him at all because Techno didn't pronounce his g's in suffixes. "Pity, that."

"Monster," he found himself saying, eyes locked on the prone body of his *friend*. Ranboo's best friend. "You *monster*."

Techno tilted his head, a smirk crossing his face and revealing his Feline fangs and Piglin tusks all at once. "That's what they call his kind, isn't it?"

"What?" he whispered.

Techno gestured at himself. "I can see his memories, you know. I know how much he resented being part Piglin sometimes." He sneered. " *Monster* , they would whisper. *Freak* . *Undeserving* ." Tommy stared at him in horror. "I guess that's all Piglins will ever be."

"No, that's not true—"

"You know he thought of you as his little brother?" Techno whispered, his words slicing through Tommy's haphazard sentence. "You know he thought you were annoying? Bad luck? You know he only loved you because he thought you owed him a favor?"

Tommy opened his mouth to reply but hesitated. "Liar," he said. "You're a manipulating freak. I'm not falling for this again." *It's not true, it's not true, it's not true—*

"Again?"

Tommy winced. "Shut up. *Shut up*." He needed to somehow get Techno away from Tubbo because although there was blood on the floor in a black pool—why did red light make red blood black?—maybe Tubbo was still alive. Techno hadn't stabbed him through the heart.

He had told himself that after Ranboo's death, he would protect Tubbo.

He had failed.

Why did he always fail?

"NO!"

Tommy turned, grabbing for the blur of a Human girl that bolted past him, her eyes on Tubbo's prone body and the Commander standing over it, sword dripping lifeblood.

He missed. Or maybe Drista dodged. He didn't know, but Techno had to raise his sword to stop Drista's full-blown swing straight for his head in an arc that would have *certainly* killed him from the blunt-force trauma or given him a rather significant brain injury.

"No," he whispered. "No, *no*—"

"You *killed* him!" Drista howled, and then there was a clash of metal against metal—blunt against sharp—as the two began their duel from something that looked like an ancient Terran medieval movie that sometimes Ranboo had watched.

Tommy didn't have a weapon. Tommy didn't have anything. And if Drista made one wrong move—if she slipped or made a mistake, Techno's razor-edged weapon would kill her too.

Tommy was helpless.

Feeling worthless was an understatement.

He stumbled towards Tubbo's body as the two moved away, a look of pleasant surprise on Techno's face and horrifying rage on Drista's. She would kill him, Tommy knew. She would kill him because he had killed Tubbo, and she would call it self-defense and then hate herself forever.

He knelt down and winced at the wound that was gushing blood from Tubbo's body. Tommy reached out and prodded it, his fingers coming away slick with the scarlet liquid—and then

jerked back in surprise as Tubbo let out a small groan.

He's alive, he's alive, he's alive, he's alive—

Tommy looked back over his shoulder, the clash of metal telling him both occupants of the duel were alive. By the look on Techno's face now, he was angry that Drista, a mere sixteen-year-old girl, could keep up with him in a fight.

One of them would lose, and the loser would die.

Drista was irrational. Angry. But it made her fierce and brave. Techno was being controlled by the Egg—that made his stamina infinite, or until his body gave out. Drista was young, and Techno had experience—and yet the Human held her ground anyway in a dance that she seemed to slip into with ease.

Still, as long as he heard the metal clashing against each other, it meant that Drista and Techno were both alive, if not well.

"Tubbo," he whispered, leaning over the boy. "Tubbo—"

"Ranboo?" Tubbo breathed out, barely audible.

And boy, that hurt. That hurt because Ranboo was dead, and Tubbo thought he was dead alongside his former husband.

"No," Tommy said. "It's Tommy."

"Oh."

Well, no need to sound so disappointed.

Tommy reached out and grabbed Tubbo's hand, wincing slightly when he realized that he was getting blood everywhere. "Come on, Tubbo, you have to hang on—"

"It's okay," Tubbo insisted gently, his eyes barely open a crack. Tommy stared at him in horror. "It's—" he gasped slightly, and Tommy let go of his hand and pressed down on the wound. Lani had said something about pressure, right? "—ow, fuck—it's... okay."

"It's *not* okay," he insisted, tears in his eyes. "None of this is okay, Tubbo."

Tubbo moved his hand as much as possible to grab Tommy's leg and squeezed it once. Tommy pretended he couldn't feel Tubbo's blood soaking the place where he was kneeling.

What had Lani said? Losing over two liters of blood would send you into some sort of shock?

This *had* to be over a liter. Tommy pressed down harder on the wound, tears pricking the corners of his eyes, the saline falling down onto Tubbo's uniform, lost in a sea of red. The clash of swords faded to background noise. "I am *not* letting you die, Tubbo. Not on me, not today."

He was not a medic, though, and—

"Some things—" Tubbo gasped out. "—were just...meant...to...be."

"No, no," he muttered. "No, Tubbo—what am I without you?"

A slight smile entered Tubbo's face before it changed into a grimace of pain. "Yourself."

Tommy shook his head again. "Don't you close your eyes on me," he insisted, and now his face was all wet—it had to be raining, right? Somewhere. "I'm not losing you."

"I'll—I'll tell Ranboo—" Tubbo choked out. "—that you... said...hello."

He was violently reminded of another promise to say hello, another day, in a situation far too like this for him to appreciate.

Say hello to the stars for me, Tommy.

I'll tell Ranboo you said hello.

"No," he said. "Not today." *Maybe another day, but not today.* "Not today, damn you."

"Stubborn," Tubbo murmured and then coughed, raising his head. A bit of blood leaked out his mouth, and Tommy stared at him in horror. "Always been—your bravest—bravest quality."

He would not find Tubbo alive, only to lose him again.

He forced a smile. "That's not true."

"Maybe...maybe it's—it's—"

"Hey, shh," Tommy whispered, smoothing back Tubbo's hair with his hand. He was getting blood everywhere. "Save your energy, Tubbo. You're gonna make it." There was blood up to his elbows. Staining his pants. Black; bathed in red light. A boy struck down by a friend.

This was some sort of horrific nightmare that Tommy couldn't leave.

"Tommy?"

Tommy looked down at where Tubbo was, lying on cold metal with a pool of dark liquid surrounding him, who had blood running from the corner of his lips and from his nose, who had blood on his forehead from Tommy touching it gently, whose brown eyes were dark and peaceful, and whose gut had a hole through it, about an inch and a half long and half an inch wide, all of it leaking; *oozing*, blood. He was only mortal—they all were, and so when they fell down, they bled red. There was no caste to blood, no love. No hope reflected.

And so Tommy looked down at Tubbo and knew in his heart he had already lost him.

"Yeah?" he said softly, unable to keep the shakiness from his voice and the tears from his eyes—unable to save him.

"I can't breathe," Tubbo whispered. "Is that so bad?" Tommy's heart dropped, and the corner of Tubbo's left lip curved up in dark amusement.

His hand slipped from where it'd been propped on Tommy's knee, splashing softly in the pool of his own blood. He blinked once—slowly, languidly—and then closed them one final time.

They didn't reopen.

The smirk faded from Tubbo's face as his muscles relaxed.

Tommy *panicked*, removing his hands from the Shulker's chest and scrambling for a pulse.

Chroma had taught him how to take a pulse some five years ago. He still remembered—he remembered many things that Chroma had taught him, maybe more than he should. He placed his index and middle fingers on the side of Tubbo's windpipe and pressed down harshly, praying to any God that would listen that there was still a heartbeat.

He didn't find anything at all.

don't bring a knife to a gunfight, unless, of course, the gun doesn't work. Then definitely bring a knife.

*"Never deprive someone of hope;
it might be all they have."*

- H. Jackson Brown, Jr.

"No," he whispered, jolting back and staring at the prone body of his friend. "No, *please*—"

There was no pleading with God, with destiny. Tubbo's chest did not rise and fall, and his heart did not beat; and his lungs did not flow with—with...

..with air...

"NO!" Tommy screamed, tipping his head back and feeling the tears slide from his eyes—oh, to be so woefully alive—down his cheeks and neck. "FUCK YOU!"

There was a large crashing sound, and Tommy looked over his shoulder in time to see Purpled come careening around the corner, crashing into one of the delicate mechanisms. They locked eyes—cyan to magenta; gold to gold; life to life—and then Purpled's eyes fell to the body that Tommy was kneeling next to and the subsequent lack of *life*.

He had not been there to see Purpled's face when he'd been told that Ranboo was dead. Purpled hadn't been coherent enough to understand when Tommy had told him on the Red Planet that half of the members of the Children's Rebellion had been executed.

And so when he saw Purpled's face drop, like a stone off a cliff, it was a new emotion, and one he'd hoped to never see. There were ugly tears on Tommy's face and blood *everywhere* and snot flowing down his chin, and yet somehow, somehow, he was living and breathing when Tubbo wasn't. There was a part of Tommy that was relieved to know that Purpled was alive, but he banished that thought for later—because someone *wasn't* alive.

The clash of swords made Purpled look away from Tommy and Tubbo to Drista and Techno, his face blanching in the red light when he saw them quite literally trying to kill each other with swords. He raised his phaser—ten shots left, Tommy noted, before he'd have to replace the cartridge, except he couldn't because Tubbo's last act had been to switch off the main power, which included charging the phaser cartridges.

Purpled took aim and fired, finality on his face.

Tommy missed it—missed the bolt that flew over his head, just past Drista's ear, and hit Techno straight in the heart. He missed it, and that mattered because he didn't know what *color* it was, and *that* mattered because he had no idea if Purpled had just stunned Techno or killed him.

Drista whirled around, lips twisted into a snarl. "I *had* him, asshole!"

"You're welcome," Purpled said softly.

Drista didn't respond because she'd just spotted Tommy and Tubbo, and she let out a soft gasp, the noise echoing across the eerily quiet engine room—God, that was scary—and then dropped her sword, the metal making a harsh *clank* against the ground. "Oh my God."

Purpled was by Tommy's side, reaching around and feeling for Tubbo's neck. Tommy didn't bother to tell him that he'd already tried; Purpled would've felt for himself anyway. "No pulse," he said. "How long has it been?" Tommy stared at him, and Purpled grabbed his shoulders, leaving bloody handprints. "Snap out of it, man! How *long* has it been?"

"Thirty seconds," he whispered. "Maybe forty-five."

Purpled shoved Tommy out of the way, and he fell on his back, blinking in surprise. "Starting CPR," he said into a room of two other breathing occupants. He put both his hands on Tubbo's chest, over his lungs and pushed Tubbo's head back, letting the Shulker's mouth open. "Time me, Drista."

"R-right," the Human said shakily. "Twice per second. Go. Breaths every thirty seconds."

"What?" Tommy asked, as Purpled used his body weight to push down on Tubbo's chest, caving it in slightly. What the fuck was Purpled doing? "What's CPR?"

Drista stared at him. "You don't know what CPR is?"

"...should I?"

"Yes!" Drista cried out.

"...twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty," Purpled said under his breath.

They all winced when the first rib cracked.

"Come *on*, man," Purpled grunted. "*Breathe*."

"CPR only works forty percent of the time," Drista whispered under her breath. "And not when people get *stabbed*."

Purpled raised his head and glared at her. "You think I don't *know* that?" Tommy bit his lip and didn't say that he hadn't known that. "Come *on*, man..."

"What's the purpose of CPR?" Tommy asked suddenly. He didn't wince so hard the second time the sound of breaking bone—oh, God, that's a second rib—echoed into the silence.

"It's used to restore breathing and get the heart beating," Drista said softly as Purpled restarted his counting to thirty. Over and over. Tommy wondered how he wasn't tired.

He also wondered why he and Drista were just sitting here waiting for a boy to be resuscitated.

"I asked him what I was without him," he said softly. Drista looked at him sharply, green eyes reflecting red emergency lights. "He said yourself."

Drista winced. "That's... interesting."

Tommy shook his head. "Yourself," he whispered. "*Yourself*."

Who are you?

"My name is Tommy Innes," he muttered under his breath. "And I am—I am the son of Sam Innes, and I am an...I am an Avian." Drista was giving him a weird look, and if Purpled hadn't been so busy, he would've probably been judging Tommy too. "I am an Avian, and Avians...Avians don't—" He cut himself off and crawled over to where Purpled was leaning over Tubbo. "Get him to breathe, you said? I can do that, I can *do* that."

"What?" Purpled asked him, surprise flashing across his face and finally pausing.

"Move," he said, and Purpled, bless him, actually fucking *listened* to him—though, in fairness, CPR hadn't been working. Tommy pushed Tubbo's chin up, letting his mouth open, and took a deep breath, and *pushed* the air down Tubbo's throat and into his lungs, just as he'd done every time he'd attempted to push Drista's stupid tennis balls away.

And despite nobody having a hand on Tubbo's chest, his chest jumped as his lungs inflated with air. "I can do this," Tommy muttered, ignoring Drista's small gasp and Purpled's muttered curse. "I can do this."

Avians didn't fall unless they wanted to.

He could restrict airflow and stop someone's heart; why couldn't he restart it? Why couldn't he keep it beating?

Tommy took in another breath, and as he let out his air, he drew the air from Tubbo's lungs. He breathed in. Pushed new air down the Shulker's lungs. Again. Again. *Again*. Tubbo's chest rose and fell, looking slightly off where Purpled had cracked his ribs.

He paused when he felt a tiny bit of resistance.

Withdrew. Pushed his fingers shakily into Tubbo's neck and could've cried with joy when he felt the faint *thump-thump* of Tubbo's heart—beating all on its own—faint, but still fucking there. "Heartbeat," he said, raising his head and meeting Purpled's eyes.

It took a lot to shock Purpled. Tommy had told him that Chroma was sentencing him to death and he had only twitched slightly; had met him again years later and gotten only a '*holy shit, Tommy?*' and a tight hug. Tommy had held a gun to his own head, and Purpled hadn't blinked—and then had remarked that if he had pulled the trigger, then he would be causing Purpled to commit suicide as well. They had created a suicide pact, and Purpled hadn't done more than tilt his head.

So perhaps it was a more remarkable testament to what Tommy had done when he could safely say that Purpled's mouth was open. Jaw-dropped. Quite literally.

He snapped out of it fast and checked for himself—it wasn't that he didn't believe Tommy; he was just a paranoid idiot. Which, fair enough, if his past spoke measures. "Drista," he said, attempting, and failing, to wipe his surprise off his face. "You need to run and warn Lani what's going on. Get her ready for some real emergency surgery. Maybe grab the AED in hallway 43-B2."

"43-B2?" Drista repeated, and Purpled nodded absently, already pushing his hands into the pool of blood to pick Tubbo up—thank God the boy was small, because Tommy didn't know what he would've done if it'd been as someone as lanky as Wilbur or Techno.

Drista nodded and ran off, grabbing her sword off the ground. Tommy got to his feet, and Purpled huffed, lifting Tubbo firefighter style to his chest, both of them wincing as Tubbo's hand, stained with blood, fell limply off the side.

He certainly looked dead. But Purpled's hand was pressed firmly into Tubbo's neck, and Tommy was confident Purpled would've started yelling at him to *do his magic* or whatever if Tubbo's heartbeat had ceased. He was just unconscious.

Or maybe in a coma.

Drista's harsh footsteps faded as she left through the door, and Tommy looked over at Techno. "Did you kill him?"

Purpled snorted, tilting his head to toss the hair out of his eyes. "Don't be ridiculous. I stunned him." Tommy nodded. "Did you doubt me?"

"Yes."

"Good," Purpled said. "It means you're learning. Don't trust anyone."

"You're my friend."

"So?" Purpled asked, a horrible smirk crossing his face. "Be a dear and pick up my phaser, will you?" He gestured from where it was lying in a pool of Tubbo's blood. "Try not to shoot yourself until *after* we reach the safe room."

"Shut the fuck up," Tommy snarled at him, bending down and picking up the weapon. Nine shots, the cartridge screamed at him. All the crew with phasers had sixteen shots or less. That wasn't ideal, but, well, at least they weren't hurtling towards infecting the entire fucking universe. That was even less than ideal.

Together, the two trekked through the passages of the now-darkened hallways, the only sound their breathing; two strong beating hearts—and if you were to listen, you might've heard the small *thump-thump* of a third heartbeat—and it would be weak, but it would signify one more life that had not been failed.

Not yet.

Sapnap wasn't outside the door of their 'base,' and Drista, looking a bit pale and shaky and with bloodstains adorning her boots, opened the door to admit them, squinting up and down the hallways before she closed and locked it manually behind the three.

"Put him on the table," Lani commanded Purpled, completely ignoring Tommy—which, yeah, fair; he'd told her not to come. But *also* in fairness, and judging by the AED on one of the poufs and the multitudes of syringes and what Tommy was pretty sure was an IV bag, Lani couldn't have exactly saved Tubbo from bleeding out in the engine room with what she could carry and the shit in her fourth-dimensional box.

He wasn't going to say that, though. The madder Lani got, the more she reminded him of Niki.

And so Tommy had to stand awkwardly next to Purpled and Drista—a healthy, not-within-reach distance from Lani—as they watched the Shulker girl attempt to save her brother.

Wasn't there, like, ethical rules against operating on family members?

"How is he breathing?" Lani asked, turning towards them. Her face was pale, and the beginnings of tears shone in her eyes, but she hadn't had her breakdown yet, because she was more professional than Tommy could ever be.

Tommy raised his hand. "I inflated his lungs," he said, and Lani stared at him, confused.

"He airbended," Drista said.

"That's not a thing," Tommy said.

"Stop, both of you, stop," Lani said, and Tommy and Drista shut up. "Okay, so you started his heart again. Why didn't you go to CPR?"

"I did," Purpled said. "It wasn't working."

"Okay," Lani said. "Okay." She took a deep breath and prodded the wound's edges for a second, swiping her finger through the blood. A heartbeat passed. A very neutral look crossed Lani's face, one that screamed *calm-practiced-serene*. She turned back to the other three. "I can't fix this."

"*What?*" Tommy demanded.

Lani gave him a baleful look. "He's lost too much blood." She shook her head. "I—I can't fix this." Her voice broke before she pushed through, and honestly, Tommy didn't much blame her.

"How can you say that?" Purpled demanded angrily. "How can you stand there—"

"WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT ME TO DO?" Lani screamed at him, and Purpled, in one of his rare moments, looked shocked. For the second time in under an hour. "He's lost too much blood, Purpled. I'm not going to..." she let out a shaky sob. "I'm not going to waste bandages when he won't need them."

"He's breathing," Tommy pointed out, pretending there wasn't a harsh lump in the back of his throat.

"He's in a coma," Lani corrected. "I *told* you, I don't have enough blood—"

"What about yours?" Drista jumped in.

Lani blinked at her. "I'm the operating doctor. I can't afford to lose a liter of blood and feel woozy while doing surgery. Then we'll just waste time and still lose him. And *no*, none of you are doing that. You'll kill him."

"Right, not like you've already put him on Deaths' Row," Purpled snorted in annoyance.

"I am not *magical*," Lani hissed. "Do you somehow think I don't want to save my *brother*?" Nobody answered that. "My *only* living relative? I love him—but he's going to bleed out. All the bandages in the world couldn't regen the blood he lost, and I don't have his blood bags because they're in the medbay, and we can't get to the medbay because it's on the other side of the ship, and he has roughly four point five minutes left, and—"

"Lani," Drista said, reaching out and grabbing the now-hysterical girl's shoulders. "Lani, breathe."

A bit ironic, that.

"I can't," Lani sobbed, clutching onto Drista like she was the only thing rooting her to the ground. "He's—he's my brother, and I became a doctor only to watch him *die* because I wasn't good enough to save him."

"Nobody could've saved him," Drista murmured into her hair, her eyes shining with tears.
"Not with what's in this room."

Some things were just meant to be.

Tommy felt it was safe enough to wander over to the table, and he brushed Tubbo's hand, wincing a bit at the coolness. Tubbo's chest was just barely rising and falling, and the towels used to constrict his wound were loosening. The wound was only sluggishly bleeding, though—not a good sign. *I'm so sorry, Ranboo*, he thought miserably. *I've never been good at keeping promises. It's not in my blood, I suppose.*

Wait.

Blood.

Tommy looked over at Lani, his heartbeat quickening. "How many liters of blood do you need?"

Lani sniffed. "About one before he's out of the death zone, but I told you I couldn't afford that —"

"No," he said. "No, not you. *Me.*"

Silence.

"You're psychotic," Drista said after a moment.

Lani pushed Drista away, her brown eyes widening. "No, you're a genius!" she gasped.

"I am?" Tommy asked blearily. "Uh, I mean, of course, I am."

"He is?" Drista said, confused.

"Avians are celestial blood donors!" Lani shrieked. "Purpled, grab me the bag and the needle?!" Purpled nodded wordlessly, spinning around to get the materials.

"Avians are what now?" Drista asked.

"CBD," Tommy explained. "It means we can give blood to any species, and it'll change to accept it." Niki had said that a long time ago—over a year ago. It was in his file, but he hadn't remembered it until now for some stupid reason.

"Oh my God," Drista said, hand going up to cover her mouth.

"Tommy, sit down," Lani said, pushing him into the nearest chair and grabbing the bag, the needle, and some random ass tube that screwed into the bag.

Look, he didn't know medical terms, alright?

"We're gonna do this the old-fashioned way," Lani said. "I'm so glad I took a course on early twenty-first-century medicine. We don't have modern technology, so we're going with the old ways." She wiped the needle with some antibacterial wipe before tossing it at Drista, who caught it offhandedly. Lani hesitated. "This is really going to hurt," she warned. "Also, you're definitely going to pass out." She hesitated. "You won't die, though. Maybe."

"*Maybe?*" Purpled roared in the background.

"I'll do it," Tommy said calmly. "I'll do anything."

"Good," Lani said, brown eyes glittering. "You might just have to." Tommy inhaled sharply when he felt the small stick into the joint of his elbow, right where the vein was. Either unknowing or uncaring of his discomfort, Lani stuck a piece of medical tape to the needle and to the skin underneath. "Don't touch that," she warned. "And if you pass out, tell someone, please. Don't bleed everywhere."

Tommy swallowed and refused to look at the tube and the needle that was withdrawing blood from his arm into the bag, knowing that would instantly make him nauseous. Purpled had already made that mistake, as he was swallowing rapidly and attempting very hard not to look at Tommy's blood.

Drista just looked fascinated. Then again, that was Drista, child spy extraordinaire.

"So... you can fix him?" Purpled ventured, swallowing again and pointedly not looking at Tommy.

Lani shook her head, her hands already busy with Tubbo's wound. "I can attempt to stitch it closed," she said miserably. "He might die from shock anyway, or poisoning, or an infection... anything might go wrong."

"But the blood," Drista said weakly.

"The blood gives us a chance," Lani said. "That maybe he'll survive a few hours. He might bleed out anyway."

"My God," Drista said.

"I feel sick," Tommy announced, suddenly feeling like the room was spinning despite not moving.

"You're losing blood; that's how it works," Lani said, sounding a lot like Drista in her wryness.

Purpled moved over to stand next to Tommy. "Don't worry; I call your picture collection if you die." He placed a hand on Tommy's arm—specifically the one *not* with the needle in it.

Tommy scowled up at him. "Fucker," he said. "Does blood make you nauseous?"

"No," Purpled said.

"Who's lying now?" he asked cheekily. Purpled, the mature Human he was, stuck his tongue out at him in a very Tommy-like fashion. Man, Purpled had been hanging out with him too much.

"Drista, how are *you* with blood?" Lani asked, silencing Tommy and Purpled.

"Blood?" Drista said, blinking. "I'm great with blood. Love it, actually."

"Always knew she was a vampire," Tommy muttered. Drista flipped him off without looking at him.

"Right, okay, I need you to hold Tubbo's wound together while I stitch it," Lani said, and about three jaws dropped. Lani looked over her shoulder. "What?"

"Hold his—" Drista cut herself off, sounding baffled. "What?"

Lani made a face. "It's too large to do it with two hands. I need yours." She put her arm up, and yeah, being a Shulker and roughly five feet was a hard life.

Drista held up her pale hands. "Yep. Right, okay. Hold the stab wound together. I can—I can do that."

"Pussy," Tommy laughed, but it sounded slurred.

"Purpled, hold his head when he passes out," Lani said without looking at them.

"You're sure he's not going to die?" Purpled asked, his voice an octave or two higher, though his face didn't make any emotional response.

"Man, you almost sound—sound worried there," Tommy laughed, feeling breathless. The room was *really* swirling now, and Lani and Drista, around Tubbo—he would not say body, he would *not*—were saying something that the ringing in his ears overrode. Drista had her sleeves rolled up now, and she was leaning over Tubbo's body, a forced neutral expression on her face. Lani had a needle and more suturing thread in her hand.

By the drawn expression on her face, this was a temporary solution to a permanent problem.

Tommy looked at Purpled, grimacing back the bile and the queasiness that swirled in his gut. "I don't feel so good," he groaned.

Purpled patted his arm soothingly. "Don't be such a baby," he said. "You've bled worse."

"I have never voluntarily given up this much blood," Tommy grumbled.

"You're *still* conscious?" Lani asked, sounding surprised, though she didn't turn around. "Drista, more pressure." The Human girl complied with a slight hum.

"He's a stubborn bastard," Purpled said fondly.

"Ish wha' kep' me alive on Pogtopia," Tommy said proudly.

"It's what kept all of us alive," Purpled murmured under his breath, and Tommy almost half-imagined he had heard his friend say that.

"Those stitches look fragile," Drista said, right as Tommy was on the brink of consciousness. There was no reason not to slide into that darkness—he felt safe with them there—but something; maybe adrenaline, maybe stubbornness, maybe remnants of a past age when he *hadn't* felt safe enough to fall asleep—kept him awake.

And so his eyes were still open when Tubbo's heart failed again.

His eyes were still open when Lani called for the AED, abandoning the bloody needle and suture thread for the semi-ancient piece of technology that was supposed to shock Tubbo's heart back to beating.

His eyes were open when Lani stepped back, defibrillation pads in her hand and tears streaming down her face, and shouted, "Clear!" Drista, pale and white-faced, pressed the shock button, and Tubbo's body jumped on the makeshift operating table. Lani checked the pulse, shook her head, and Purpled's hand gripped Tommy's arm so tightly he thought it might break in two.

"Clear!"

"No pulse."

"Clear!"

"No—"

Tommy slipped into unwelcome unconsciousness.

bro why are my dead friends here

Chapter Notes

this chapter is courtesy of another (relatively stupid) promise I made.

yay.

*"A true friend never gets
in your way, unless you happen
to be going down."
- Arnold H. Glasglow*

The Golden Gate Bridge had always been beautiful at night.

Tommy breathed out into unrecycled air, his hands reaching out to touch the red-painted metal of the handrails. The moon was setting; the stars painting swaths across the sky due to the restrictions on lighting in the attempt to reduce light pollution globally. A cool breeze ruffled through his hair, tangling in unkempt curls and the remains of a never-redone braid.

His right hand curled around the metal. His left remained flat on the bar; unable to fully close. Sooner or later, he would have to make his choice—or maybe he wouldn't, and he wouldn't need to fucking chop it off to be a helmsman.

There were footsteps on his left.

Tommy looked over to see a short-haired Elytrian girl standing there, her hands clasped at her front, her cadet clothes unrumped and pristine. Her pale green wings ruffled behind her as if unused to the feeling of air on them.

"The stars are pretty," she said conversationally, peering at them through her pale blue eyes.

Tommy turned away from her for a second to look up at the glimmering lights. "I wonder how many of those I've been to," he murmured.

"Well, there's Betelgeuse; you've been there, right?" the girl said, pointing up at Orion's constellation.

"Yes," he allowed, a sad smile crossing his face. "I was there for the funeral of a very dear friend."

Sniff turned towards him, a slight twinkle in her eye. "Pity that engine rooms never have stars," she murmured, waving a hand up at the expanse of the sky. "Hello, stars."

The stars did not say anything back. They were, after all, stars.

"Are you real?" Tommy asked breathlessly.

Sniff laughed at him, the corners of her eyes scrunching up. "No, silly, I'm the figment of your imagination." She reached out and poked Tommy's forehead. "I'm right there." She moved her hand down and pressed it over his heart. "And I'll always be right here, right with Ranboo and Grian and Alyssa and Foolish and your family."

Tommy let out a breath. "I'm afraid," he admitted, tilting his head back as Sniff stepped back, allowing him to turn back to the bridge that peered out over the waters.

"Of what?" Sniff said kindly.

"Waking up," he said.

"Tubbo will be okay," Sniff said—like she knew what he was thinking. Of course she did. "I promise."

He was already shaking his head. "I remember Lani saying no pulse, and the AED—"

"Tommy," Sniff said patiently, for she had always been too forgiving, too patient, too kind—and he should have died instead of her. "I promise you, he lives, for now."

"You don't know that," he muttered thickly.

Sniff smiled and tapped the side of her head. "I'm part of you, dummy," she teased. "You would know if he were gone."

Tommy took in a deep breath and let it out, sinking deep within himself. He could feel the faraway bond with Rae as she did her duties aboard the Mira, blissfully unaware of the hell the L'manburg was going through. He could feel Techno, still alive but unconscious, a rigid barrier between them — and what he was sure was a screaming cacophony of voices behind said barrier.

And distantly, he could feel the heartbeats of four people in the room his body was in—four, not three, because Tubbo's heart beat sluggishly once more.

"See?" Sniff whispered. "You are more powerful than you realize."

He shook his head. "No, I'm just making this up."

"You're gaslighting yourself," Sniff chastised. "Wake up and see."

"I don't want to wake up," he said thickly, and the tears were heavy on his face, pouring in narrow rivers down his cheeks. "You won't be there."

"I made that sacrifice so you could have a better tomorrow," Sniff whispered. "Because you, Tommy Innes, deserve it."

He gave a baleful laugh, peering over the edge of the bridge. "Jumping didn't help, did it?"

"No," Sniff replied shortly. "It didn't."

"God, that feels like forever ago."

"We're all waiting for you," Sniff told him, and Tommy turned away from the bridge to see her standing there, a small smile on her face. He glanced beyond her and saw a group of silent people standing there, ghostly and pale—but welcoming.

Tommy took a step forward when he saw Ranboo there, the tall Enderian the most prominent of the group. Alyssa smiled when he met her eyes, and Grian smirked and raised his chin — as if that could ever help his short stature, his now-healthy grey-purple wings ruffling in greeting much like Phil's did when he saw Tommy. Foolish raised a hand, his green eyes—so very different from Drista and Dream's—ageless and happy. Tommy let out a small sob when he saw the white-haired Feline in her helmsman uniform, a motherly smile on her face to Foolish's left.

"Oh, Tommy," she whispered, and despite their distance—and with the wind, it never should have been heard, but this was all in his head, and so it was, it was. "I am so proud of you, nephew."

"Tommy," Sam said, and Tommy took another involuntary step forward. "I am happy to call you my son. You are everything I could've wanted of you and so much more."

"Dad," he whispered.

There was a woman next to Sam with blonde hair and blue eyes that looked a lot like him. She smiled in greeting but didn't say anything—she didn't need to.

"Mom," he choked out. Her smile widened, and she leaned her head against Sam's shoulder.

The members of the Children's Rebellion didn't say anything when he looked back at them. Alyssa moved first, raising her left hand above her head and curling her ring and pinky finger inwards. Grian followed, then Foolish, and finally Ranboo. Pridefulness shone in Alyssa's eyes, her lips curling up into a smirk to reveal her fangs, and Grian had a broad smile across his face, his wings spread out in a show of intrepidity. Foolish's lips were parted, his green eyes shining proudly, and as for Ranboo — Ranboo, the memory-lost member of the Children's Rebellion, well—he just looked joyful as he stared at Tommy, and Tommy stared back; cyan eyes meeting green and red.

Tommy felt a slight pang in his chest.

Ranboo had sacrificed himself for Technoblade, for someone he looked up to, and then Technoblade had gone and nearly killed—or maybe had killed—Ranboo's best friend.

It wasn't Technoblade's fault; not at all. But a dark part of Tommy appreciated the sheer irony that came from that fact. Had Technoblade died that day from Chroma's shot, then Tubbo wouldn't be bleeding out on a coffee table in the middle of a Phantom-proof room surrounded by his only allies on an exploratory vessel mind-controlled by a parasitic alien egg.

He turned back to Sniff, wondering how he still had tears left to cry. Then again, this was all in his head, and this was all him. She spoke before he could.

"We'll be waiting for you," Sniff said. "When the time is right."

"When is the time right?" he found himself asking.

"Not today," Sniff told him, a smile flashing across her face, gone in an instant. "Not today."

"Not today," he echoed. Then, "When?"

"At the end of the line," Sniff said, a smile brightening her face. "Always."

Tommy turned back to face his friends and family, who were quiet but stared at him with pride in their faces, their eyes, their body language. "I love you," he said, to them. "I miss you."

They did not say it back, but he knew they meant it just as he did.

He knew.

Tommy sluggishly blinked his eyes open to stare at the ceiling. He groaned and reached for his arm, which was twinging in pain—his elbow, actually, at the joint.

A green and blonde blur appeared over him, and Drista Taken stared down at him. "Hey, sleepyhead," she said, which was almost nice. "You look like a dumbass when you're sleeping." That made a bit more sense.

Tommy sat up, blinking heavily at her. He was lying on one of the couches, and looked around to see Lani curled up in one of the seats, her knees drawn to her chest and eye shadows the size of watermelons under her eyes. Purpled was lying on the ground, his head on his arm, and a blanket thrown on top of him, as if in afterthought. He was sleeping too.

Tubbo was still lying on the table, Tommy noted frantically, but his cheeks were rosier than they'd been—he was still pale, though—and the AED defibrillator was neatly packed away. He also had a blanket thrown over his body, and Tommy saw bloody bandages poking out

"He breathes," Drista said when she saw him staring at the Shulker boy. *For now*, she did not say, but Tommy heard that. Drista lowered her voice. "We're nearly out of bandages and suturing thread. Lani says that we need to change the bandages every three hours and pray that the stitches hold him together for now, but we simply only have one more set."

"My blood?" he asked.

"Worked like a charm," Drista told him, grinning broadly, some relief in her eyes. "Just like we—well, you and Lani—thought. He didn't instantly die, so I'd say the blood transfusion was a success."

Tommy swallowed and glanced at the emptied bag next to Tubbo, lined with bits of dried blood. "That's good. How long was I out?"

"Eight hours," Drista said. "Everyone fell asleep three hours ago. I offered to take the first watch. Purpled insisted I wake him after two."

"You didn't," Tommy said, and he didn't think he sounded accusing.

"He worries," Drista explained. "A bit like a mother hen. I've been trained to go without sleep."

"You—" Tommy started. Drista flashed him a glimpse of her teeth, more beast than Human. "Right. Child spy. Seems about right."

Drista sighed. "How's Techno?" she asked.

Tommy blinked at her. "Huh?"

"Is he alive?"

"Oh," he said. "Yeah, yeah. He is. You'd know if he wasn't."

"How?" Drista asked, eyes wide.

Tommy grimaced. "I'd probably start seizing," he admitted. "I couldn't tell you for sure, 'cause he's not an Avian, but if Rae were to die suddenly I'd have all sorts of brain and heart problems, like an abrupt cut. Now, if it were released gently, there'd be a difference, but death doesn't give you that kind of relinquishment."

"You're telling me," Drista said slowly. "that you are bonded to someone currently trying to kill us?"

"Yeah," Tommy said after a moment. "Proper mad, innit?"

"Fuck off," Drista snorted. "You sound like Wilbur."

Tommy winced and reached a hand up to his throat, where he knew there was a hand-shaped bruise. Drista flinched slightly, indicating she knew she'd accidentally hit a sore spot. "Yeah. Wilbur."

Drista put her hand down on his legs, and Tommy moved them backwards towards his chest, curling them under his body. The Human girl sat down in the place he'd just abdicated, a small frown marring her features as she took in the darkness of the room; the only light a small emergency nightlight and the faint glow of the cross-wiring of Phantom-proofing. Purpled and Lani slumbered on, and Tubbo, at least, breathed. "I was prepared to kill him," she said in a low voice.

"What?" Tommy asked, turning his head to fully acknowledge her. Drista met his eyes, once-bright green looking dull and tired.

"Techno," Drista said, lowering her eyes, like she was ashamed or something. "I was prepared to kill him. *Again*."

"Oh," Tommy said, not knowing what else to say.

Drista smiled; a small thing that screamed pain and hurt. "I've already shot him once, Tommy. If Purpled hadn't been there with a stunner, and I'd gotten an opening, I would've taken it." She swallowed and tilted her head back to lean against the couch. "I would've hated myself forever, but I would've done it." She hesitated. "To save you, and have a chance at saving Tubbo. I would've done it."

"He would not have blamed you, Drista," Tommy said kindly, using his foot to push into her thigh until she scowled and pushed it back.

"I know he wouldn't have blamed me, and neither would Dream," Drista said tiredly. "Techno understands the consequences of war, and Dream is an ex-spy, never mind my brother. Still, he's my friend. I would have hated myself forever."

Tommy shook his head. "Forever is a long time."

"Only about seventy years," Drista said, smirking. It faded after a moment. "What the fuck do we do now?"

Tommy took a deep breath and let it out. "What do you mean?" It was a rhetorical question—he knew what Drista was asking, and by the small glare she threw in his direction, she could probably tell.

"We've—well, Tubbo—has shut down the engineering; warp speed, weapons; etcetera. But that's not going to last long, is it?" Tommy opened his mouth to argue, but Drista waved a hand at him, silencing him. "Tubbo's brilliant, sure, but he's not even an engineer. He's an Operations Officer—sure, the *Chief* of Operations, and he's a genius too, but nobody knows the engine room like the engineers. They'll find a way through the code Tubbo put up."

"How long?" Tommy asked.

Drista shrugged. "Two days. Three, max."

Tommy rolled his shoulders back and leaned his head against the pillow under his neck to stare at the ceiling. "So we bought ourselves some time."

"Time to figure out what?" Drista demanded.

"How to reverse the effects of the egg," Tommy said. "Or maybe find some way to send out a signal to a crew that isn't full of people trying to kill us."

"And possibly risk getting them infected too?" Drista asked, raising an eyebrow. "That's a no on my list."

"What would you want us to do?" Tommy asked. "Give up? Agree that there is no possible chance to fix this, just like there wasn't a way to undo Admiral Toast's crewmates—except this time *they* outnumber us?"

"We cannot let them infect anything else, or any *one* else," Drista said softly. "And if that's what it takes, yes."

Tommy let out a laugh, shaking his head. "Then you are braver than I ever was." He closed his eyes. "It's the right thing to do—to let us drift in space forever, to condemn us all to death or fly us into the nearest star—but I'm scared."

"I'm terrified," Drista admitted. "I was scared today that I would turn the corner and see my brother standing there, with red eyes instead of green, and he would either kill me or I would kill him."

"Is this how it ends, then?" Tommy asked the air. "All of us doomed to die?"

"We don't know that," Drista said.

"No," Purpled said, and Tommy and Drista both lifted their heads to stare at the boy, who had awoken sometime between them looking at him and their conversation. "No, this is not how it ends. I refuse to allow it."

"Purpled," Drista said softly. "Sometimes you need to let go of the things you can't change."

Purpled shook his head. "I did not go through all this bullshit—*he* did not go through all this bullshit—" He pointed at Tommy, who blanched. "—just to die due to some stupid fucking alien egg. We are going to survive this if it's the last fucking thing I do."

"Might just be," Tommy muttered, crossing his arms.

"Arguing isn't going to—" Drista started.

"I'm not arguing," Purpled cut across her. "I'm simply explaining why I'm right." His loud proclamation woke up Lani, who started, her hair a mess as she yawned and stretched, blinking away the sleepiness.

Tommy snorted. "Never change, Purpled," he said fondly.

"Tubbo—" Lani gasped, jumping up and stumbling over her blankets. Nobody bothered to tell her that he was alive because she would've checked anyway. Lani let out a sigh of relief when she found her brother's pulse. "He's alive. He's alive."

She was telling herself more than any occupants of the room.

"How's he doing?" Tommy asked.

Lani shook her head. "I don't know."

"You *don't know*?"

"I'm not a magician, Tommy!" Lani said, sounding annoyed. "I have no technology and rudimentary materials. We're lucky the blood transfusion was a success as it was." She rubbed her forehead. "If he's going to survive, I'm going to need actual medical supplies. Not this...bullshit." She waved her hand at one of the side tables, where a small pile of bandages and what remained of the suturing thread and the bottle of pain meds.

"Language," Drista said.

"So," Tommy said slowly. "We have about forty hours left to get medical supplies, try to reverse the Egg's damage to—to everyone—" He pretended his voice didn't break, and the other three listening feigned ignorance as well. "—and also possibly send a signal to any ships out there while we're in the middle of butt-fuck nowhere that we need help."

"Copy that," Drista muttered sarcastically.

"Hang on," Lani said. "In order to send a signal, we'd have to turn the power back on. We'd reverse everything my brother did. His sacrifice would be meaningless."

"That's not true," Purpled pointed out. "There are four things that need to be done." He gestured around. "There are four of us currently viable for these mini-missions." Tommy sat up, interested. "One. Medical supplies. Two. Someone needs to go to the engine room and turn the power back on. But people will be there trying to fix it. So we're going to need a distraction, and someone that can get away fast. So mission three is we need to try to blow up the Egg. The crew will—"

"Excuse me," Drista interrupted. "Are you possibly suggesting setting a fucking bomb?"

"I am," Purpled said, eye twitching from the interruption.

"Need I remind you we're in the middle of a spaceship?"

"Wow," Purpled said. "That's a newsflash to me. Moving on—" Drista rolled her eyes, but didn't complain. "—the crew will be drawn to the Egg like bees to honey."

"Tubbo likes bees," Lani said.

"Good for him, but Tubbo is currently unconscious," Purpled said. Lani scowled at him. Tommy didn't know whether to laugh or look shocked. "The fourth mission is the sender of the message. Four missions, four people. Forty hours."

"I hate the number four," Tommy said.

"There is literally no reason to hate the number four," Purpled told him. "I mean, maybe six, because of the Traumatized Teenagers and Pogtopia, but..."

"There are four members of the Children's Rebellion six feet under," Tommy pointed out.

"Sounds like a them problem," Purpled replied.

"Oh," Lani said, blinking like she didn't know how to respond.

"Um." Drista coughed into her elbow.

Tommy snorted. "Let's not make that six this week, shall we?"

"Don't worry, I'm not going to die until I slit Chroma's throat," Purpled said.

"That's worrying," Drista muttered.

"It's called coping mechanisms," Tommy pointed out.

"Violence?" the Human asked wearily.

"Yes," Tommy and Purpled said in unison.

"He definitely deserves it," Purpled added.

"Can't argue that one," Drista said, shrugging.

"Regarding the missions, who here has experience with hacking?" Purpled asked. Drista and Tommy raised their hands. "O-kay. Drista, you should do it."

"What?" Tommy cried out indignantly. "But I hacked the Wasteland!"

Purpled eyed him. "You're the fastest one in this room, Tommy. We need you to cause the distraction so that the engine room and the bridge get cleared out."

"The bridge?" Lani questioned.

"It's where emergency signals get sent from," Purpled said. "I'll be doing that because I have the most experience—being the Quartermaster, and all." He looked around as if daring anyone to argue. Nobody did. "Lani, you're on medical supplies."

"We can't do that one together?" Lani asked in a small voice.

Purpled was already shaking his head before she finished. "We have to take them by surprise. They didn't expect the first movement we made for the engine room and the shuttles, and they won't expect a group of children to do other things like that within ten hours. The longer we wait, the more time they have to recuperate and get stronger."

"Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me," Tommy said. Drista nodded slowly.

"It has our crewmates' memories," Purpled said, looking around. "It has their bodies. But it is not a person—it does not know how to behave like an alive being. It perceives us as children, and the only reason that it hasn't forced our family to blow a hole through this door—" he pointed at the only entrance to the room. "—is because it does not see us as any deadly sort of threat. It saw Tubbo as a threat—but that can possibly be ignored because Tubbo was of the bridge crew. We were not. We have two Ensigns, a Junior Officer, and a Quartermaster. It thinks we retreated because we were scared."

"Are you attempting to psychoanalyze an alien Egg?" Lani asked, sounding scandalized.

"I am *currently* psychoanalyzing the Egg," Purpled replied. "Not attempting." Drista rolled her eyes. "Let's be realistic. If we were any authentic threat it would've forced its way

through the door—Tubbo's not the only one who knows how to create bombs. We're *not* considered a priority, especially with them thinking Tubbo is dead."

"They think Tubbo is dead?" Lani asked hollowly.

"Techno stabbed him in the back," Purpled pointed out. "Tommy has never played God before." Tommy blinked rapidly. "All evidence points to him being dead. He might die anyway." Lani raised her chin, and Drista winced. "He *should* be dead."

"Thank God for Avians," Drista said.

"It doesn't perceive us as a high priority threat," Purpled stressed. "More like bugs that need to be stepped on because they annoy it, not deadly spiders. Otherwise we'd be dead."

"Great," Tommy said. "I've always wanted to be a cockroach." Purpled raised an eyebrow at him. "I mean, uh, O' Fearless Leader, whatever shall we do?"

"Thank you, Ensign Innes," Purpled said mockingly. "We'll crawl through the vents like Tubbo and I did before. They didn't know we did that." He raised his arm, where there was a small bandage wrapped around his wrist. "We all have our trackers out, yeah?"

"When did you get yours out?" Tommy asked, frowning.

"When you were drooling," Purpled replied. "Then I did Lani's."

"He has surprisingly steady hands," Lani cut in. "You could've been a doctor."

"No thank you," Purpled said. "Not enough information circuits the medbay." Lani rolled her eyes. "We'll head through the vents and split off. Drista, engine room. Do *not* engage any enemies."

"They're not our enemies," Drista said.

"The dictionary definition of enemy is someone who is hostile or actively opposing," Purpled said. "They're enemies, even if they were once considered friends."

There was a moment of silence.

"Why the fuckin' hell do you know that?" Tommy asked.

"I studied a bunch of lawyer cases," Purpled said. "Just in case I murdered someone one day."

"Good to know," Lani said in a high-pitched voice.

"Anyway," Purpled said, rolling his eyes. "That's beside the point. Drista, I swear to God, if I see you attacking anyone and creating your own goddamn distraction and getting yourself fucking killed, I will dance on your grave and call you an idiot at your funeral. I will also say *I told you so* copiously. Is this clear?"

"Clear, sir," Drista said mockingly.

"Leave the distraction up to Tommy," Purpled instructed, turning to Tommy. "You need to get in and get out as fast as possible. Do you understand me?"

"Yessir," Tommy said, in the exact same mocking tone Drista had used.

"You two are two peas in a pod," Purpled grumbled. Tommy and Drista fist-bumped.

"Tommy, your job is to injure the Egg and draw the crewmates away from the engine room, the bridge, and the medbay, where the three of us will be. You have the most dangerous job."

Tommy swallowed and lifted his chin. "How do I do that?"

"Explosives," Drista suggested. "That's always the answer, right?"

"According to Tubbo, maybe," Purpled said. "But our resident explosives dealer is currently in a coma, so—"

"I have C4," Lani interrupted.

Purpled paused, swinging his head to look at her. "You what?"

Lani flushed, twisting her wrist and bringing out a small rectangular bomb-looking thing that made Tommy want to get as far away from her as possible. She brought out a remote with her other hand. "I have six pieces of C4 and a remote."

"Why do you have that?" Drista asked, eyeing the device warily.

"Tubbo told me to always carry bombs just in case," Lani said.

"Of course he did," Tommy grumbled. "Give them here." He got up and dumped the medkit out, emptying it.

"Hey!" Lani cried out.

"I am not carrying eight bars of C4 in my fucking hand," Tommy said. "Get another one." Lani huffed but handed over the bombs, and Tommy took each brick and gingerly put it into the now-empty bag, praying that them colliding against each other when he was running wouldn't set it off. He was pretty sure that wasn't how it worked, though. He finally took the

remote from the Shulker girl and tucked it into the pocket of his uniform, ignoring the dried blood that was staining both the sleeves and the pants.

"You're going to move in first, Tommy," Purpled told him. "When we feel the explosion—and it's in the cafeteria, we will—Drista, you will enter the engine room and attempt to break the code. Lani, you will enter the medbay and gather as many supplies as you need to save Tubbo. I will try to send a message to the *Mira*."

"Why the *Mira*?" he asked curiously.

"Because Toast is the one that'll understand," Purpled said wearily. "And if he thinks it's too big of a risk, he'll leave us. Just like he's supposed to." Tommy swallowed, but nodded. "Right. Let's go."

"*Now*?" Lani asked. "I'm hungry!"

"We don't have food," Purpled said, and paused for the first time in his 'briefing'. Tommy closed his eyes for a long moment—he hadn't even thought about *being* hungry, because sure, they hadn't eaten in like a day, but, well, he and Purpled had gone on longer without food. "And we're either going to succeed or die here. If you want you can pick up some rations from the fridge in the medbay." He stood up. "Come on."

"Can I talk to you?" Tommy asked Purpled in a low voice as Drista went to grab her sword and Lani scampered to check on Tubbo one last time. Purpled gave him a wry look. "You're a good leader, Purpled."

"Thank you," the Human said tiredly.

"Do you think—" Tommy started.

"No," Purpled said.

"You didn't even know what I was going to say!"

"You were going to say that if I had been the leader of the Children's Rebellion then Foolish, Alyssa, and Grian wouldn't have died," Purpled said wryly, and Tommy scoffed, but didn't argue with him—because that was precisely what he'd been going to say. "That's not true at all."

"You would've made better decisions," he said.

"Maybe," Purpled shrugged. "And would they have died? Maybe not." Tommy let out a long breath and tilted his head back. "There would've been one more person to watch their backs before they were ambushed if I hadn't been sick. There would've been one more provider. There would've been one less useless person."

"You weren't useless," Tommy said kindly.

"I *was*, and don't you fucking lie to me, Tommy Innes," Purpled warned. "So maybe if I hadn't been sick, then yes, they would've lived—because there would've been one more fighter. And maybe I would've been executed with them. Who knows." Purpled let out a long breath, reaching up and putting a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Forget the past, Tommy. You have enough to worry about in the future for now."

Tommy gave a jerky nod, turning to go grab his stuff.

"Tommy?" Purpled asked.

He looked over his shoulder. Purpled was holding out a hand, an object in it. Tommy took it robotically before realizing what it was.

"You'll need it more than me," Purpled said with a thinning of his lips.

Tommy stared down at the phaser, blinking at the cartridge, with nine out of sixteen bars full. "I can't take this," he said.

"You can," Purpled said, letting go. "And you will."

"I can't shoot them," Tommy said.

"It's set to stun."

"I *can't*."

"Then you'll die," Purpled said, his eyes flashing. "And we won't get revenge on Chroma if you die, will you? He'll win. Do you want him to win?"

Tommy looked away and didn't answer.

"They're willing to kill *you*, Tommy," Purpled said, his tone softer but no less brutal. "You have to be willing to take them out too."

"No, you don't get it," he said through gritted teeth.

"I do."

"You could never get it," Tommy said, and Purpled's eyes flashed dangerously at the connotations. "because everything bad happens to me, and *I can't control it*; I can't stop it, I can't FUCKING THINK—"

Drista turned to look back at them, her mouth opening. Lani yanked her back, all but dragging her into the bathroom.

"Tommy—" Purpled started.

"Is it me?" he interrupted. "Am *I* the cause?"

Purpled shook his head, a bewildered look on his face. "You're just in the wrong place at the wrong time. All the time."

Tommy gave a loud, resentful laugh. "You can't be *serious*," he said, flabbergasted. "The *H.M.S Fran*? Pogtopia? The motherfucking Children's Rebellion? The *Midway*? The *Benecia*? All of that, and you're standing there, telling me that it's the WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME?" His voice rose in both pitch and octave at the end of his sentence.

"Your parents put you on the *H.M.S Fran*," Purpled pointed out.

"Don't," Tommy warned, raising the hand that wasn't holding the phaser and pointing his finger at his friend. "talk about Sam like that."

"I'm not," Purpled snorted.

"Yes, you are," Tommy said. Purpled raised an eyebrow, but didn't rise to the bait. Tommy sighed helplessly. "Why do I survive, Purpled?"

"Because you are strong," the Human replied instantly.

"Oh," Tommy said, and because he was feeling argumentative, continued with, "and the others aren't? *Weren't*?"

"I didn't say that," Purpled said neutrally.

"You implied it."

Purpled snorted. "You're jumping to conclusions," he said, which made Tommy feel like the Human was reading his mind. "You lived because you were—and *are*—strong, but I didn't say you were stronger than them." Tommy let out a breath. "It is hard to live with everything that has happened to you—to us—because you are a victim of a game you didn't want to play, and you are the victim of a monster who has set his eyes on you through no fault of your own." Purpled hesitated, and then added, "and maybe PTSD and unluckiness."

"You're going to pin this down on luck?" he asked.

Purpled rolled his eyes. "Of course, *that's* what you picked up from that speech," he said, sounding annoyed. "Not anything else I said because all of that couldn't possibly be important except for the last word."

"I hate you," he said and didn't mean it but didn't instantly correct himself either.

Purpled's eyes softened. "I know," he said, in the way that he did when he understood. "I know."

"So why me?" Tommy whispered. "Why not anyone else? Any one of them would have been better." *You are better*, he did not say.

Purpled shrugged. "Maybe they would have been," he said flippantly. "We'll never know, will we? Best not to dwell on what-ifs."

"I wish this never happened," Tommy muttered, squeezing his hands into fists, the cool metal of the phaser digging into his palm. "I wish I wasn't known for being the leader of the Children's Rebellion."

"Technically, that's your fault," Purpled said. "Remember that interview?"

"Shut up," he snarled.

"Just saying."

Tommy threw up his hands. "They're calling me a hero on their fuckin' news sites, Purpled! I see Wilbur reading them! God, *Drista* has read them!"

"Oh, really?" Purpled said, feigning shock. "I need to read those—"

Yeah, like he wasn't an informational control freak and didn't have programs written to check for Tommy's full name on the 'net—and probably his first name too, within set parameters.

"Be serious for once," he cried out. "I am not a hero!"

Purpled regarded him. Thoughtfully. "You're my hero," he said, and Tommy fell silent, staring at him in shock. "Really. You are."

"Right," Tommy snorted. "Name a hero that was *happy*, Purpled." Purpled gave him that *look*. "None of us are happy. Get it?"

"I never said that being a hero required you to be happy or have a happy ending," Purpled said softly, raising a blonde eyebrow. "In fact, I would think it would be the exact opposite, in the end."

perspectives pt. 3

Chapter Notes

this chapter came to life because I promised Rowan if they read *The Name of the Wind* I would publish a chapter

(yes there will be an update Friday)

I am so tired

*"It is mercy, not justice
or courage or even heroism,
that alone can defeat evil."*

- Peter Kreeft

Lani

Lani lay flat on her stomach, trying not to breathe as she peered into the medbay below. There were currently three occupants—two more than she'd expected and three more than she'd wanted. Thankfully, two of them were unconscious.

Niki was there—and boy, that made her cringe a little when she heard the Merling hum the popular songs that sometimes played on the radio when Lani would turn it on study near a space station. Complete with her nearly-naturalized hair color, the Chief Medical Officer moved around the two cots on which Technoblade and Eret were lying, both unconscious.

Technoblade she had expected. By the heart monitor in the corner, he was clearly alive—Purpled hadn't killed him, and neither had the harsh floor—though he had a bandage wrapped around his head, and he wasn't waking up.

Eret was another story entirely. She'd been surprised to see them here—none of the other kids had even *seen* Eret in the past ten hours, much less shot at them. He had binders on, too, which made even less sense since they were explicitly made for Phantoms, and there was only one of that kind aboard the *L'manburg*, what with it being an exploratory vessel and all that. Why were they in the *medbay*, unconscious, with nothing more than a light bruise framing the top of their left cheekbone and slightly cracked glasses—not to mention the handcuffs that would stop him from phasing through things and subsequently escaping?

It made no sense, and it wasn't like Lani could ask. If Eret had been out of the Egg's control—first of all, they were twenty-four, not twenty, which was when Phantom brains finished maturing—then they would be dead, not handcuffed in the medbay. *Second* of all...

...she didn't have a second of all, but she was just confused.

There was a sliding of the medbay door opening with a slight *whoosh* of air, and Lani, who had spent so much time in the medbay she could've navigated it blind and deaf, instinctively looked over her shoulder to check who had come to the door.

Which also made no sense since she was in a tiny claustrophobia-inducing air vent.

Lani peered through the holes in the vent and prayed that Techno, who was right below her, wouldn't suddenly wake up and see her brown eyes. That would be really awkward.

Niki had already turned to talk to the person that had entered—oh, it was Sapnap. Great.

"No sign of the children," Sapnap said. "They are still hiding in that room, then." Lani wrinkled her nose at his casual straining of the syllables—his telltale drawl was gone, and he just sounded *weird*. "I came to check on the Phantom."

"I do not understand why they have betrayed us," Niki said, her brows furrowing. "He was fine just earlier. I can still feel his mind, but it is slipping."

"What about the other Phantom?" Sapnap asked. "You feel that too?"

Oh, no, what had happened to Wilbur?

"Yes," Niki said. "He is an extension of the Egg, same as us, still, but he slips too. Has anyone seen him?"

Sapnap was already shaking his head. "Not a glimpse."

Niki frowned. "This is quite unfortunate. But it is no matter. He is not on the side of the children. We will deal with him later."

Sapnap *tsked*, and by the Gods, she had never heard him make that sound with his throat, and she never wanted to. "The children will stay in their room," he said, sounding annoyed. "Perhaps they will not come out until after we dock."

"That would be for the best," Niki said, tilting her head. "They are an annoyance to the hierarchy." Lani was both intrigued and horrified by this conversation—it was like watching two alien versions of people she knew very well having a conversation.

Oh, wait, that's what she *was* doing.

Also, *hierarchy*?

And apparently Phantoms were reacting negatively to the Egg, but weren't not-mind controlled, but still sort of mind-controlled?

Her head hurt.

Sapnap jerked his head at Techno. "And the Commander?"

"He will awaken within a few hours, I should think," Niki said. "The Human boy did a number on him with that stunner." She pursed her lips. Lani shuddered. "They are smarter than we thought."

"They are crew aboard the ship," Sapnap allowed. "It would make sense. The Shulker boy was especially smart. According to this host's memories, he was a genius. Maybe we should take them out."

Uh, no.

Niki waved a hand. "He can just code," she said snippily, and Lani bristled. "It has been assured that the minds of the technical engineers will have a breakthrough in about eight hours," she said. "His password was done in seconds, according to the memory recall of the Commander—it is not a random password. It would mean something to him. It has six spaces."

Oh. Well, that was both creepy and weird. Also, it was probably *Ranboo*. Why hadn't they guessed that already?

"What could it be?" Sapnap asked.

"I do not know," Niki said, sounding puzzled. "Every time I delve too deeply to search the emotional memory of the body, they tend to fight back." Lani felt a bit of hope rise in her. "It is unbelievably... frustrating."

"Frustrating?" Sapnap asked. "I do not comprehend."

Niki shrugged her shoulders. "I think I am starting to understand the term *emotion*."

"Come, maybe we can help," Sapnap suggested. Niki hesitated. "Unless, perhaps, you feel an attachment to your host's room?"

"I do not!" Niki snapped, sounding defensive. "Let us go. There are only four children left, anyway." Lani winced. "They have a stick and a stunner. They will not hurt their old friends."

"We can count on that," Sapnap said, his voice fading as the two left through the door.

Lani counted to ten. Slowly. Then, because she was nervous, she counted to ten again—what if they'd expected her to count to ten before popping back in? Wait, what if they'd expected her to expect them to expect her count to ten?

She counted to thirty before she moved.

Lani huffed as she pulled the grate of the vent aside, wincing as it scraped against the floor of the vent, the metal-against-metal sound making her freeze and wait for someone to come rushing in or Techno to wake up.

None of those things happened. Lani hesitated before dropping down into the medbay, landing in a crouch, glad that she and Drista had spent hours trying to do cool drop-rolls after watching some animated show called 'anime', or something.

Technically she wasn't supposed to enter the medbay until Tommy had caused his distraction. But it wasn't like there was anyone *here*. Niki and Sapnap had left, and Techno and Eret were unconscious!

Lani walked over to the cupboard, typing in *1-5-7-2* to unlock it. She paused carefully. Her brother was dying of a stab wound through his stomach, and here she was staring at medical equipment. She had to *move*.

The first thing she did was open the fridge and shift through the bags of blood types, grabbing one for every one of them. A positive for Drista, B negative for Purpled even though his blood type was AB negative, her own blood for herself and Tubbo—two bags—just in case, and a bag of Avian blood so helpfully donated by Rae at Niki's askance. Then she put them in a miniaturized cooler and banished them to her *Torak-Khogari*.

The second thing she did was grab a tricorder, because that would definitely be helpful. She hesitated before passing over the bio-electric generator—sure, it might be life-saving, but it would take up most of the space in her *Torak-Khogari*, which would probably be better used for a multitude of smaller things.

Lani grabbed a new scalpel, and some bandages, and was thankful for the autosuture she was able to find. She was *tired* of using twenty-first-century medical equipment to do her work. She threw some gloves into her space as an afterthought because she was also tired of getting blood all over her hands and under her fingernails. She opened the fridge like Purpled had recommended and grabbed some cardboard-tasting rations—at least it was food. The last thing she grabbed from the cabinets after replenishing the general supplies and a pulse oximeter was an I.V bag and some fluids.

Just in case it took Tubbo a while to wake up.

Because he *would* wake up. He would. She would see to that. He was destined for great things, and he was the smartest person she had ever met and ever known. He would not meet his end in the hands of a *friend*.

Lani turned to go—she couldn't reach the vents; she'd have to travel through the corridors—and paused. There, resting against Techno's bedside, was a sword that had dried blood resting on the blade.

That'll ruin the metal, was the first thing she thought.

The second was, *oh, that's Tubbo's blood*.

Drista

When she was little, she had been tasked with stealing a ring from the trainer's rooms at night. If he caught her, she had to run six miles the next morning. If she got it, they moved on to the next test.

It had taken her three days to succeed. Drista still remembered the burning in her lungs from those early-morning runs—she'd been, what, nine? Eight? They'd moved on into hacking after that. At night. If she got caught, she ran. If she managed to hack the door open, they moved on.

She reminded herself that this was very similar. Slip into the engine room, guess Tubbo's password—or hack into it, which made her nervous, because Tubbo had always been good at things he wanted to be good at—and turn on the power. Everything that Tubbo had sacrificed himself for to buy them time she would be undoing.

Wasn't that a pleasant thought?

She'd waited until the occupants of the room—four people, maybe; she hadn't checked who they were—had come running out of the engine room after a slight, faint, explosion could be heard. So Tommy had succeeded in planting the C4.

Drista kept a firm grip on her sword—though it wouldn't really do much good against a phaser, would it?—and crept around weirdly silent machines, trying to keep her breathing at a minimum. Every time she passed a dark corner, she expected Techno to leap out at her, but everything was so oddly *silent* it made her uncomfortable. She was pretty sure that engine rooms weren't meant to be quiet when the ship was floating through space.

The lights cast a red shadow down on everything, making it infinitely creepier, but Drista swallowed her pride and reminded herself that she had to turn on the engines and the power so that Purpled could send a signal, so that the *Mira* would come and save them—or come and mourn them, because Toast was a hard bastard who understood sacrifice; particularly from when he'd had to throw two of his best friends off his ship because they might've been mind-eating murderers.

That'd only been a good thing for her, Lani, and Tommy, though, when they'd ended up on Icarus-45HB.

She couldn't imagine having done what he had—perhaps it made sense why he'd retired and become a Vice Admiral that oversaw the Fleet school. The crew had separated and had come back together just in time to find out that Valkyrae and Sykkuno were, in fact, alive.

Maybe after this was all over, she would retired.

She snorted to herself—not because it was funny, but because she could imagine herself retired at Fleet school at the brilliant age of sixteen. People would ridicule her.

Maybe she could teach Survival Science. That would be funny.

The thought of *retiring*—and the weirdness that came with the realization that she was genuinely *considering* it, made her stop in her tracks in between two water purifiers. God, maybe Phil was right. War was a terrible thing. She hadn't even become a full Tactical Officer yet—and she'd thought that'd been her dream for ages. Follow in her brother's footsteps. Drista felt her knuckles tighten around her practice sword, and wondered what would come out of all of this. Maybe, *maybe*, she would survive—and then what? It wasn't like everything could go back to normal. Drista was pretty knowledgeable on PTSD—Dream had it pretty badly, as much as he laughed it off—and she was certain that Tubbo, if he lived, if not Lani, would have the signs of the disorder. She herself had been unable to walk near fires for *months* because she felt like the crackling of the logs were bones crunching.

A small part of her told her she would always remember the glint of fire and anger in Techno's eyes as she crossed swords with him, unlike in the practice room—had she slipped up, he would have killed her without a doubt. She'd been fighting for her life, and not against an enemy.

Drista let out a breath and moved forward, shaking her head. First step: survive. *Then* think about post-traumatic stress disorder. At least if you had PTSD it meant that you survived. God, *that* was a horrible thought to think. She needed to stop thinking.

She paused, looking down at her feet. Well, there was *one* way to get her off her PTSD rant. Tubbo's blood was still on the floor, dark and black in the red light.

She stepped over it. Tubbo had blood. He wasn't dead—well, maybe he was, and she just didn't know that yet.

She needed to learn some optimism. Lani was better at that than her.

Drista went over to the control monitor and turned the screens on.

Please enter a password. Only when this password is entered can power be restored, unless there is an [Admin] in the system.

Well, she wasn't an Admin.

➤ *NuclearWarfare*

Incorrect. Please enter the password. There are [4] attempts remaining before total shutdown.

Well, shit.

Drista placed her hands flat on the console and breathed out. Tubbo had had *seconds* to devise this password due to Technoblade's interference. What would he think?

➤ *Beeboy*

Incorrect. Please enter the password. There are [3] attempts remaining before total shutdown.

She couldn't do this.

Come on, Drista, THINK! the voice in her head, which sounded awfully like Dream, commanded her. *What would Tubbo think of?*

Oh.

➤ *Ranboo*

Password accepted. Welcome to the system [User: DR15T4] . What would you like to do?

➤ *Shut down primary power [N/A]*

[➤ *Restore primary power*]

To guarantee that [User: DR1ST4] would like to restore all primary power, please pull the blinking lever.

Drista blinked and turned around to the lever that Tubbo had pulled to shut *off* the primary power. Once she pulled it, she'd have to be fast. Tommy had already caused his distraction—otherwise, the engine room wouldn't be empty, and she'd waited for the four people to pass—and they'd know that someone was here and come back for her.

She ran over to the lever and pulled it, turning instantly to run for the single entranceway. She needed to get to the closest vent, she needed to *live*—

She was halfway to the door when she paused.

Well, *that* wasn't supposed to be there.

Oh, shit.

No, no, *no*—fuck—

Purpled

There was an explosion that rocked the ship. Faint, but it was there. Purpled closed his eyes and put his head in his hands from where he was sitting in the vent outside the lift to the bridge.

Please be safe, Tommy. I can't live without you.

Moments later, two people came out of the lift, their eyes a terrible burning red, and carrying phasers. Philza Minecraft and Dream Taken. Hang on, why wasn't Wilbur with them? *That* didn't make any sense.

They went rushing down the hallway towards the explosion—towards *Tommy*—and Purpled heavily debated saying *fuck it* and running to save his best friend.

Tommy could take care of himself.

Well, actually, he couldn't, but that was beside the point. Purpled had to trust him.

Purpled didn't trust Tommy, not with his own life. Also beside the point.

He had a mission to complete. He couldn't throw it all away for a chance at saving one person. Purpled hesitated again—this would get him killed—because, yeah, he *could* throw everything away for Tommy, and he would.

He had to send the signal.

There was a blaring of an alarm that made him since as the power to the ship flickered back on, and the telltale hum of the engine came online. Purpled stopped himself from a yell of victory—this wasn't done yet.

Purpled dropped down from the vent, scowling as he stumbled from the landing. He wasn't very adept at *sneaking around*; that was Drista's fucking job, not his. He was an information

keeper, and he would never be vulnerable to ignorance again.

7-8-3-4.

The lift doors opened for him and he stepped inside. He crossed his arms behind his back and waited for the lift to ascend.

The bridge was a room just screaming *cornered* at him. Purpled let out a breath, and stepped over to Wilbur's station, valiantly wishing that he had a weapon, but also glad that he'd given his to Tommy. Usually, he'd ask Clementine to send the signal, but she wasn't online, otherwise, she would have contacted him nearly instantly. They had an understanding, of sorts. He pretended she wasn't an A.I, because those were, of course, illegal, and she gave him information that even he as a Quartermaster couldn't get. Such as illegal records. Such as access to Philza Minecraft's awful Hardcore mission some twenty years ago. Such as admission to transmissions he *definitely* didn't have clearance for.

There was a small *mrowl*, and Purpled spun around to see a green-eyed *dhi'sk* staring at him balefully.

"There you are!" he said, oddly feeling some sort of joy at seeing Ca'jat sitting on the console. There was a second mowl, and Purpled watched with hidden glee as Mellohi crawled up beside her brother, her purple and white eyes watching him with what he thought was a bit of scorn. "Sorry, Tommy isn't here—he's sort of dying."

Mellohi hissed. Purpled wondered if she just hated him or actually understood what he meant and cared for the owner she clawed about ninety percent of the time.

Ca'jat jumped down from the console, landing elegantly on his feet. Purpled turned back to the communications screen as the *dhi'sk* twirled through his legs, rubbing his black head against the blood on Purpled's uniform.

He grimaced. "That's Tubbo's blood, not mine." Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mellohi tilt her head at him, her eyes narrowing. Not that she understood him. "Okay, now how the fuck do I send this goddamn long-ranged communication...?"

He was still trying to figure it out when the lift doors hissed open. Ca'jat was instantly on his defense—thanks a lot—and Mellohi looked behind her, her neck twisting some eighty degrees to look at the new occupant of the room.

Purpled felt his blood run cold as he removed his hands from the communication board, turning fully to face his eldest brother. "Hello, Punz," he said, in awe of the steadiness he'd somehow managed to keep in his voice. "Pleasant day, isn't it?"

"It is, I should think," Punz replied, and wow, that was really eerily and clearly *not him* talking. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

"Playing Tetris," he said instantly, because Punz had liked playing Tetris and maybe he could somehow get his brother back, and *oh*, he was such a hypocrite because he'd told the others to *shoot for the kill* and he didn't think he could have done it himself.

Maybe.

"Oh, but of course," Punz said, his lips curving up into a smirk that really really creeped Purpled out. The Egg was controlling his brother; controlling his voice, his facial emotions, his *tone*. But it wasn't some imposter; it was his brother's *body*—not a clone or a copy, but a parasitic alien *thing* that had made its home in the heads of all the grown-ups on the *L'manburg*. "Whatever else would you be doing at the communications board?"

"Well, you know," he said, swallowing when he saw the phaser in Punz's hands—fifteen shots. "I didn't see Wilbur here, so I thought maybe I'd practice being the Chief of Communications."

Punz stiffened—perhaps more than he should, and Purpled squinted at him slightly, trying not to seem obvious about it. What the hell had happened to Wilbur that he hadn't been with Phil and Dream on the bridge?

Unless he'd killed him in the hallway. Purpled winced. No, he hadn't.

...had he?

"It matters not," Punz hissed, his red-tinged eyes flashing. "You will *die*, boy."

"Punz," he said.

"Punz isn't here anymore," Punz—no, the *Egg*—said. "Punz will never be in control again."

"I..." he said, trailing off.

Punz flashed a smirk and raised his phaser, his finger thumbing over the trigger. Across the bridge, Purpled raised his chin. His brother was a Security Officer—he would not miss, Purpled knew. Not in such an empty space like that, not when he had all the time in the world.

"Say goodbye," his brother whispered.

I'm so sorry, Tommy, Purpled thought miserably. I couldn't kill Chroma. I couldn't save you .

Then Punz shouted in pain, and then there were two flashes of yowling black animals as Mellohi leaped for his face and Ca'jat tore at his ankle with flashing fangs, and Purpled dove out of the direct line of fire, ducking behind Dream's tactical/helmsman desk, his hand grabbing a metal handle and pulling it as hard as he could until it ripped out of the desk with a sharp crash.

There was an animalistic whine, and Purpled stiffened when he heard phaser fire, his heart dropping. Oh, no.

No, he couldn't have killed Mellohi and Ca'jat. He wouldn't do that, would he?

Yeah, *it* would. Punz would never, but the Egg would.

They were only animals, but they had been his—his and Tommy's—and they represented something far greater than him. They had comforted him when he had gone to nobody, and on more than one equation Purpled had smiled genuinely when he saw Mellohi asleep on Tommy's chest, her clawed hand on his cheek.

Purpled leaned his head back against the helmsman's console and let a single tear roll down his face before he wiped it away and considered himself done crying.

"Where are you, boy?" Punz hissed, and Purpled stiffened slightly. "Where did you *go*?"

What a rhetorical question. Purpled moved, and a shot hit where he'd been sitting prior. The bar of heavy metal he shifted behind his back as he stood up, putting his free hand up placatingly. Punz stared at him with red eyes, and Purpled's eyes shifted over to the captain's chair, and winced when he saw a black-furred body lying on the ground crumpled against the wall.

God.

"There's nobody here to save you, *Purpled*," the Egg sneered. "Nobody here to watch you suffer... but your dear older brother."

Purpled's eyes widened slightly. The Egg was insinuating that Punz was aware, though not in control. That was somehow worse.

"Goodbye, little boy," the parasite that was controlling his brother's mind said, raising his phaser.

And Purpled had never been much of a physical fighter. "It's okay," he said heavily, and the finger that was on the trigger paused, as the Egg blinked at him, seeming confused. "It's okay, Punz."

"I'm not—"

"I'm not *talking* to you," he snarled. "I'm talking to my brother."

"Your brother—"

"Punz," he said, and maybe it wasn't a good idea to interrupt a parasitic egg alien thing that was trying to kill him, but, oh well, he hadn't ever made any good life choices anyway. "It's okay. It's not your fault."

"It is, actually," the Egg started.

"Would you just *shut up*?" he snapped. "I'm trying to talk to my brother!"

"You have a lot of nerve, child of Man," the Egg said.

"Yeah, I've been told that."

"Well, you'll die with it," the Egg said, and Purpled let out a breath and kept his face neutral.

He would not die with tears on his face. If his brother was in there, he would not see him beg. He would not see Purpled beg to live for a life he did not want.

Purpled did not close his eyes. If the Egg was going to kill him, it was going to be staring into the off-putting magenta-colored eyes that Purpled had been told made others uneasy, since he

was Human.

Good. Maybe he had one last part to play before the end.

There was a loud *mrowl*, and Purpled looked left, his mouth opening in shock as Mellohi—so it was Ca'jat on the floor; oh God—leaped for Punz's face, scratching him harshly with her silver claws. The Egg gave a shout of annoyance.

"These *fucking* cats!" it snarled, not seeming much bothered by the blood running down its face from deep gouges on its face.

"NO!" Purpled shouted, taking a few steps closer.

The Egg raised its phaser and shot the second *dhi'sk*, the immediate smell of charred flesh filling the air.

That was Tommy's pet—that was Mellohi, and Tommy would be devastated.

Purpled raised the metal bar and swung it as hard as he could, just as Drista had told him to do with any heavy object aiming to kill.

Six inches of solid metal collided with Punz's head as hard as he possibly could, and Purpled let out a choking noise as he realized what he'd just done. Punz crumpled like melted butter onto the ground, and Purpled let out a small sob before he clamped down on it.

He checked Mellohi's body and bit down on his lip harshly when he saw her lifeless purple and white speckled eyes, her small furred head lying at an odd angle on top of her front paws.

Oh, God.

Purpled let the bar drop to the ground with a small clatter as he gathered Mellohi in his arms, pressing his face to her still-warm body. He walked over to Ca'jat's body, suppressing a small sob as he gathered Mellohi's brother in his other hand. Despite being about two feet long, they were light in his hands. Ca'jat's body was already a few degrees colder than Mellohi's.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered, rocking them as the first tears of many slipped down his face. "I should have let you go. You did not deserve this fate. I just—" He let out a shaky breath. "I thought it would be safe aboard the *L'manburg*. Thank you for giving me the chance to live."

Some types of love filled your heart without trying.

"I don't deserve it," he murmured, shrugging off his jacket with his shoulders and placing it on the console, lying the two dhi'sks side-by-side on it. "I don't deserve it, but thank you."

Purpled looked down at his brother, swallowing as he noticed the small pool of blood on the ground. He would not check his pulse. He would not know if he had killed his brother. If he did not check, then his brother was not dead.

There was a small hum in the air that shook the hull of the *L'manburg*, and Purpled glanced out the window. He blinked in surprise; then shock. "Oh," he said. Then, "*What?*"

buckle up; you're in for a wild ride

"It was never meant to be."

- Wilbur Soot & Eret

Dream had taught him to fire a phaser, though it had always been set to stun for safety reasons and Technoblade had always been there, hovering in the background. This had been forever ago, and now he was in a vent outside of a cafeteria with eight bricks of C4 in a medpack strapped to his belt as well as a detonator.

Oh, how the times changed.

Tommy took a breath. Closed his eyes. He thumbed the *on* button and quickly flicked the lever to *stun*. He would not kill his family—today, or ever. Maybe it was selfish, but they would have to kill him first.

He knew Purpled wouldn't hesitate like that. Purpled had always been better—and maybe objectively worse—in that sense.

There were currently only two people in the cafeteria, which made sense—the *L'manburg* had long been understaffed, at around the minimum number of crewmates required, but it had always worked fine, so Philza Minecraft the Great and Powerful (and currently Mind-Controlled) had always brushed it off. Tommy was now glad there weren't as many as there were on the *Mira*, because he didn't think the five—four?—of them could've made it this far if there'd been more than the roughly thirty they had.

It was Bad and Skeppy in the cafeteria. Skeppy was the unpredictable one—Skeppy was the one who knew how to use a phaser properly. Tommy took a deep breath, knowing that the moment he shot one of them the Egg would set off an alarm and just about everyone would be drawn to the cafeteria.

When he pushed the grate aside and dropped down, finding the doors of the cafeteria thankfully propped open for ease of entry, the first thing he noticed was that the Egg was now three times as tall as him, with pulsing glowing pustule-like things roughly the size of dinner plates—gross—and red vines trailed over the entirety of the cafeteria, up the walls, and even on the fucking ceiling. It looked like a red, jungled, *mess*. Also, the air was vaguely red-tinted, like he'd stepped into a pit of red fog.

Skeppy and Bad, who were talking next to the Egg, turned around once his feet landed on the floor, their eyes the same unfortunate scarlet shade.

YOU.

"Me," he said agreeably, and raised his phaser and shot Skeppy first. Missed. Flinched. Shot him again—this time it hit, and Bad cried out as his friend went tumbling down onto the ground.

I SHOULD HAVE KILLED YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS WHEN I HAD THE CHANCE.

"You really should've," he muttered, wincing at the shouting in his brain as he dived under a cafeteria table just in time to dodge Bad's phaser fire—thank heaven on Earth the Blazeborn was both uncoordinated with such weapons when he was both mind-controlled and not mind-controlled. Tommy poked his head up, narrowly avoided dying again—oh, just a casual day in the perfect life of Tommy Innes—and shot Bad, coming up in a roll and a dead sprint towards the Egg itself.

He was glad that when he was nervous his hands didn't shake.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

"Fuck off, you fucking scrambled egg," he muttered, unzipping the medkit with his right hand, suddenly glad that he could *technically* still fire it, despite his trigger finger only bending halfway.

YOU ARE TOO LATE, TOMMY INNES. TOO LATE FOR WHAT IS TO COME.

Tommy grabbed a bar of C4 and ripped off a piece of medical tape—the only kind of tape he'd been able to find—with his teeth and slammed the explosive onto the soft, weirdly spongey shell of the Egg—God, this was fucking gross. He sort of wanted to throw up. "You're too late," he mimicked in a high-pitched voice, his voice muffling slightly as he tore off another bit of tape. Tommy gave up and sheathed his phaser, finally, praying that although the crewmates were probably coming for him, they wouldn't get there in time. "Meh meh meh meh, my name is Egg and I *fucking* smell; that's right, you *do*. I don't have pimples and you fucking *do*."

There was a bit of momentary silence. Tommy used this convenient moment to spit out the stickiness coating his lips from the tape. It may have accidentally hit the Egg. It may have not. Who was he to know?

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO CONVEY?

"Meh meh meh, my name is Eggy Boi and I don't get *jokes* ," he muttered, slapping C4 number five on the side of the Egg. "I'm stupid. *Meh*." Tommy made a small noise of disgust as one of the pustules on the Egg let out a small steam of air. "Did you just fucking *fart*?"

YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO FEAR ME, YOU STUPID AVIAN! YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO COWER, TO BOW YOUR HEAD DOWN TO—

"I'm sorry," he said, cutting across the monologue. "Are you talking to me?"

..YES?

Tommy clucked his tongue, slapping C4 number seven on the belly of the egg. "Dad told me not to talk to strangers. And large parasitic eggs."

YOU DON'T HAVE A FATHER.

Tommy gasped, affronted. "Rude! First of all, I *did* have a biological dad for the first ten years of my life—his name was Sam, thank you for asking—and second of all, I have an adoptive father. Philza Minecraft. You know that."

HE DOES NOT CONSIDER YOU HIS CHILD.

Tommy snorted, his lips sticking together from the residual tape that he'd ripped apart with his teeth. "You're a shit manipulator, you know that, Mr. Egg? You should take some notes from another Avian called Chroma. Now *that's* a guy that knows how to properly manipulate children, I'd say."

CHROMA? HMM. HE DID NOT SEEM TO DO A VERY GOOD JOB. YOU ARE STILL ALIVE.

Tommy could not believe he was having an ethical conversation-comparison *whatever* with a fucking telepathic alien pimply-ass bitch egg. This could not be good for the economy. "The fuck did you mean, he didn't do a good job?" he spat. "That son of a fucking *cocksucking whore*—" Damn, Wilbur would be proud of him with those swears. "—killed over three thousand children. And my parents. And three—no, *four*—of my best friends!" Tommy slapped the final piece of C4 onto the side of the Egg with all the strength he could muster. "And in my opinion, Mr. Egg—actually, I don't know your pronouns; Mx. Egg—he was a real fucking piece of work. Just like you."

WHY DO YOU SPEAK AS IF YOU ARE IN DEFENSE OF HIM?

Tommy hissed. "You think you're the real shit, don't you?" he muttered. "You're not my fucking therapist, because my therapist is—" he glanced over at Bad, who was unconscious. Shot by him. "—currently indisposed, thank you *very* much. Now, if you don't mind, I'll be on my way. Bye!"

Unfortunately, he wasn't that lucky—story of his life, really.

"Not so fast."

Tommy whirled around to face the wall of the cafeteria opposite the door—or where there had once been just a wall.

Now Wilbur Soot was standing there, his eyes a greyed out red, and a manic smile on his face.

Lani

Lani shut the door of the safe room behind her and emptied out her *Torak-Khogari* as quickly as she could, quickly placing the pulse oximeter on Tubbo's finger. His heartbeat was slower, but it was still there, thank God.

"Come on, Tubbo," she murmured as she hurried around, fixing everything and preparing some new gloves and bandages to check up on his wound. "You're not seriously going to—" She let out a small snuffle, and it was definitely the dust, never mind the fact she wasn't allergic to dust. "—die, right? Ha, I mean. So much for going out in an explosion."

Tubbo didn't respond.

Lani had never felt so alone.

Somewhere on the ship, Purpled was sending a message, Tommy was messing with the Egg, and Drista was breaking into Tubbo's coding to turn the power back on so Purpled could

send that message—and here she was, stuck in a room, with a roll of bandages in her hand, as she tried to save the only family she had left alive.

Briefly, she cursed her mother and father out in her head for pushing her down his medical path—she had always secretly resented them for the emotional neglect they'd shown her brother, but Tubbo had never known that. She'd never *let* him know that, because she had loved her parents and cried at their funeral, whereas her older brother had remained expressionless throughout the rite.

"They never tell you how much trauma the fucking doctors go through," she muttered, blinking the tears from her eyes—that wasn't professional, was it?—as she cut away Tubbo's old bandages.

The wound was still bleeding sluggishly. She nearly cursed under her breath before dismissing the dermal regenerator—that wouldn't work; the wound was bigger than that—and grabbing the autosuture, setting to work at sealing the wound as best she could with medical equipment that she'd only been able to fit in her *Torak-Khogari*. To fix this—because it was *fixable*—at one-hundred percent optimization she'd need the entirety of the medbay, and maybe a medical facility at any of the major Galactic Rebellion bases. She'd first made do with rudimentary twenty-first-century tools, and now she was scraping the bottom of the barrel with the barest of minimum medical supplies.

"Fuck—fuck this," she said, wiping the tears away with the back of her hand. She got a smear of blood on her face for her efforts. " *Fuck* this, they don't tell you this in med school."

According to the Code, she's not supposed to operate on blood relatives or even relatives of any kind. And here she is, with her brother's blood up to her elbows. This was all kinds of fucked up.

"I can't do this," she said, as she tied off the last of the bandages. Tubbo was still sleeping—unconscious, whatever. He drew shallow breaths, but he still breathed. "I can't—I can't do this anymore."

"You don't have to."

Lani let out a small scream as she grabbed the scalpel on the coffee table next to Tubbo's prone body and turned towards the voice's source.

The door to the safe room was open, and Nihachu was standing there, sans any form of weapon, her pale blue hair—now that she'd stopped dying it—curving behind her ears and the tube up her nose slightly more skewed than she usually kept it. Her eyes shone a brilliant bloody red instead of their usual color. "You don't have to," Niki repeated, her smile revealing the predatory teeth of her race.

"Get—get away from me," Lani hissed, holding up the scalpel like it was a knife—like she could ever stab someone. She wasn't Drista, or even Purpled. Even Tommy might've done it to protect someone—but she looked at the shaking tool clasped in her hand and knew she couldn't kill anyone, much less a friend, and *much* less her mentor that had taken her in when her parents had died and given her and Tubbo a job and a place to call home again. "Get out."

"Aw, it is not going to be that easy, little girl," the Egg behind Niki's eyes croons as it steps closer. "I can help you, you know." Niki's eyes flick to Tubbo, lying on the coffee table. "Both of you."

"No!" Lani shouts. "You—you get out of her head, you *parasite*." She was surprised her voice was as steady as it was.

Niki tilted her head. "You know she cared about you, right?" it purred, stepping closer. "She *loved* you."

"GO AWAY!" she screamed, tears sluicing their way down her face. "GET AWAY FROM ME!"

This *was* a nightmare, and she was living in it.

"We can save you," Niki said, a wide smile on her face. "You just have to *submit*." Lani shook her head furiously. "The other parts of me—they don't believe you children can be saved. But *I* do."

"I don't really want to be 'saved'," she said in a high-pitched voice. "You can—you can just leave."

"Oh, but thank goodness that other child turned the power on," Niki said. "Made opening the door *so* much simpler. It is okay, we are dealing with her too."

Drista, Lani thought desperately.

"I can't save her," Niki said. "But I can save you."

No, no, no, no.

"One of my other cells is with your dear little blonde friend right now," Niki continued. "I can hear her *gasping for air* as he kills her."

"No," she snarled. "You lie!"

Niki tapped the side of her head. "I can feel it," she said sweetly. "I can hear it. I can see it if I try."

"You're manipulating me," she spat.

Niki's eyes blackened. "You will *submit*," she said darkly. "Or you and your brother will die, just like the rest of the children."

"I..." Lani started.

"Lieutenant Nichahu *likes* you," the Egg stressed. "I don't want to kill you. But you and your pesky friends are interfering with my *plan*."

"I don't want to die either," she whispered.

Niki held out a hand, her red eyes screaming victory. "Then join me," she said. "Join *us*. Become one of us. You can if you try. The younger mind does not fall as easily as the older, but with time it will. We can try."

This gives me Star Wars vibes, Lani thought distantly. She found her head moving of its own accord. "N-no," she choked out. "I won't have one of your stupid parasites in my head."

There was a momentary pause.

Then a flash of anger crossed Niki's face and Lani screamed as the Merling moved faster than she'd thought possible, slamming into her, both girls rolling to the ground. Lani let out a groan of agony as her head hit the hard carpeted flooring, Niki's hands on her shoulders, the Merling's hair tickling her face. Lani reached up her hand and shoved Niki's face as the Merling put pressure on her gut, causing her to choke.

Her fingers tangled on a cord, and Lani cried out, yanking it out as hard as she could. There was a tug and then some give, and then Niki was suddenly off of her gut and Lani rolled over, coughing stomach acid up. She looked over her shoulder, a bit of horror filling what was left of the air in her gut when she saw Niki cupping her nose, the tube that had given her her breathing ability swinging free.

Shit, pulling out a Merling's breathing tube was a federal crime.

"You—" Niki gasped out, her face a few shades paler than it should be. "You *bitch*." Her hands grasped for the tube, reaching to shoddily shove it back up her nose. Water from the line dripped onto the floor.

Lani let out a small noise of fear as Niki stalked towards her, ferocity and finality in her red eyes, blood running down her face from her nostril—the lines were always hooked *in* the nose, and Lani had just yanked it out. She crawled backward on her hands and legs, her head

falling against the floor again as Niki approached, the Merling knowing she had nowhere to go.

A glint of metal caught her eye as Niki moved out of the line of light. Lani glanced sideways to see a phaser underneath the couch—like someone had kicked it under there. She blinked, wondering if she was hallucinating. The charger glittered with eight lights—eight shots.

Why was a phaser underneath the fucking couch?

Niki grabbed Lani's discarded scalpel, twirling it in her hands easily. "And now you watch him die," she said simply, moving towards Tubbo, the scalpel raised like some sort of cleaver.

"NO!" Lani screamed.

Her hand curled around the phaser underneath the couch, her fingers just managing to grasp it. In one smooth motion, as the scalpel descended towards Tubbo's prone body, Lani withdrew her hand from underneath the couch and shot in Niki's general direction.

She had never been a good shot. In fact, she'd forgotten to flick off the safety.

Yet somehow the safety wasn't off.

And the phaser was not set to stun.

Lani watched the bolt go straight through Niki's chest.

"Wilbur," Tommy breathed out, his hands itching towards his collar, where the remnants of bruises lay.

"Tommy," Wilbur said easily, finishing materializing, his physical state returning to tangible.

WHAT IS THIS MADNESS?

Tommy glanced towards the monstrosity that was the Egg. "He's not—he's not yours?"

PHANTOMS DO NOT OPERATE UNDER MY CONTROL.

Tommy felt a sense of glee rise in his chest as he turned back towards Wilbur. "Wil, we've gotta go—"

"No," Wilbur said. Tommy stopped. "No, I don't think so." His eyes roamed the shell of the Egg. "Nice job you've done there. With the bombs." He gestured with his right hand, and Tommy felt his blood run cold when he saw the long-ranged detonator—like the one in his medkit, but larger and *better*—in Wilbur's hand. "Makes my job a bit easier."

"What?" he whispered. "Wilbur, what are you talking about?"

Wilbur smiled at him, and by all the Gods, Tommy did not like that smile. It was too wide and showed too many teeth. "Don't you get it, Tommy?" he said. "The *L'manburg* can't be saved. Not with this thing aboard."

Tommy blinked at him. Noted that instead of brown eyes, Wilbur had grey-red. He wasn't controlled by the Egg, then.

But that didn't mean he wasn't *affected*. That didn't make him sane.

Tommy put up his hands. "Wilbur," he said carefully. "Purpled is sending out a message for help as we speak. You don't need to—"

NO, HE IS NOT. I PUT AN END TO THAT.

Tommy shut his eyes. "Can you *shut up* for one fucking second?" he hissed.

"Yes, please be silent," Wilbur said, grinning. He glanced down at Tommy's hand, where he'd drawn out the phaser. "Are you going to shoot me, *little brother*?"

Tommy felt tears prick the corners of his eyes. "What are you planning, Wil?" he whispered.

Wilbur spread his arms wide and laughed. "This place has always caused nothing but pain," he said.

"No," Tommy said, shaking his head. "That's not true. This is my *home*." There was a noise behind him. Tommy looked over his shoulder to see Phil and Techno there, the latter alive, but limping slightly. He didn't know whether to feel relieved or scared. Techno had a sword in hand. Phil had a phaser strapped to his belt, but it was depleted of all charges. Tommy looked back at Wilbur desperately. "You're my family. *They're* my family."

THEY ARE MINE, ACTUALLY.

"SHUT UP!" he screamed, surprising Wilbur a tiny bit. "WOULD YOU SHUT UP FOR ONE GODDAMN SECOND? Jesus fucking *Christ*, you're like Chroma! Just *shut up!*"

"Are you prepared to die, Tommy Innes?" Philza hissed out, and if *that* wasn't terrifying, he didn't know what was. Tommy swallowed and raised the phaser to eye level, switching between Wilbur, and Techno and Phil.

"You're my brother, Wilbur," Tommy whispered. "I love you."

Wilbur stared at him, expressionless. "The *L'manburg* has caused nothing but pain," he repeated. Tommy shook his head, words refusing to drop from his mouth. "We found Pogtopia."

"Yes," Tommy said. "You found Purpled and Ranboo—"

"You were right," Wilbur interrupted as if Tommy hadn't even started speaking. "Life brings nothing but pain." Tommy bit his lip and closed his eyes, letting the tears flow freely down his face. "And the Egg cannot be allowed to contaminate other places."

Tommy found himself nodding eagerly. "Yeah, so we've got to—"

"This place is not home," Wilbur continued, and Tommy stopped. "Not to me, not to us. Not anymore."

SHOOT HIM.

Tommy whipped his head around to look at the Egg, noting that both Philza and Technoblade had stopped about twenty paces from him, wariness ingrained in their eyes. "*What?*"

HE IS UNSTABLE.

"Because of you!" Tommy yelled.

HE WILL KILL US ALL.

"That *thing* is a parasite!" Wilbur shouted, and Tommy was heavily inclined to agree. "We must destroy it!"

"Yeah," Tommy nodded. "That sounds like a good idea. But not here."

"You don't get it," Wilbur told him. "There's only one way out of this." He raised his detonator. "There's only one way this ends." Tommy stared at him. The Egg, for once, was dead silent. "In a cacophony of fire and smoke."

"What?" Tommy whispered.

"The L'manburg is gone," Wilbur said. "Its time is over. *Our* time is over."

"No," Tommy said, desperation lacing his voice. "No, Wil. Please."

"Don't you get it?" Wilbur whispered, his words carrying across the entirety of the cafeteria and bouncing back. "This is the end. The end of the *L'manburg*, the end of us. I'm *saving* us."

"You're killing us," Phil spoke up, and Tommy didn't know if that was Phil or the Egg talking, and didn't really care.

Wilbur shrugged. "What is a little death, in the face of total universal annihilation?" he asked. "Didn't your friends from Pogtopia say that, Tommy? Didn't Alyssa Meadows paint her precious phrases of rebellion and hope across the walls and billboards of a burned-down town?"

"No," Tommy said. *Yes*, he meant.

Wilbur regarded him carefully. "What did she write?" he asked mockingly. "*I see Humans but no Humanity*?" Tommy inhaled sharply. "What did your dear old mentor say? '*Death is the most merciful ending one could ask for*'?"

"Don't quote Alyssa and Chroma in the same sentence," he spat. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?"

"I'm saving the galaxy." Wilbur raised the detonator. "It was ridiculously easy, you know. To plant all those bombs in the engine room."

Tommy stiffened. "Wilbur," he said placatingly.

"*Don't*," Wilbur snarled at him. "Take that tone with me." Tommy stopped. "You'll get it when you're older."

"If you blow up the *L'manburg*, I won't have a chance to *be* older," Tommy said, staring at the button in Wilbur's hands that could demolish the entire ship and kill every single one of them. Including the Egg, sure, but Tommy desperately realized that he had a story to tell.

He wanted to live.

Wilbur considered this. "That's correct," he said.

"Son," Phil said, and Tommy looked at him in confusion, noting the red eyes instead of his normal blue. He was still being controlled by the Egg—why was he calling Wilbur *son*? Some sort of appeasement? "What are you doing?"

"It was once a special place," Wilbur whispered. "My *L'manburg*. *Our L'manburg*."

Tommy could not find the words to talk.

"There was once a saying," Wilbur continued, his voice light and airy—as if this was nothing more than a casual conversation, and he didn't carry the means to kill dozens in his hand. "Said by many people. An Elytrian girl on the brink of death. A Shulker boy before he passed. Do you know what that saying was?"

"No," Tommy whispered, thinking of the twin moments, in the twin engine rooms—the *U.S.S Midway* and the *L'manburg*. Two friends that had died in his arms; one of which had been revived. Two friends, one saying. One eternity.

"Yes you do," Wilbur said sweetly. "Come on, Tommy. What did she say? What did he say?"

Tommy let out a breath. "Some things were just meant to be," he whispered, his eyes prickling with unshed tears.

"That's the difference, isn't it?" Wilbur told him. "Between this—" he gestured at the remote. "And all that." He gestured at the rest of the room.

"Wilbur," Philza said desperately. Technoblade was startlingly silent. Both their eyes glowed brilliant red, but Phil had never sounded more like a father.

SHOOT HIM! HE WILL KILL US ALL!

Tommy raised his phaser.

Wilbur smiled at him, and opened his mouth to spew some lasting, final words.

And in the end, despite everything, despite wanting, finally, to *live*, even if in spite, even just for revenge—he could not pull the trigger to shoot his family. To save his friends. He could not shoot someone he cared for, even if, in the end, that person was the means to the end of everyone. If, even knowing that what Wilbur was doing would destroy the Egg, if he could let most everyone he had ever cared for die at the press of a button. It was, perhaps, the *right* thing to do, but it wasn't what Tommy wanted to do. Purpled could've, but Tommy couldn't bring himself to shoot his own brother, even in the face of destruction. Blindly, he wondered if Purpled could have hurt his own brothers to save the people he cared about.

No, he decided finally. *Family, born or found, has always been the most damning of them all.*

And so he did not pull the trigger, his finger stuck in an everlasting loop, the Egg's alien scream ringing in his mind, and Wilbur Soot stood there and said—

"—it was never meant to be."

His finger came down on the button, and Tommy closed his eyes and knew everything was lost.

the right thing to do

Chapter Notes

Let's talk.

Over the course of the time Juliet and I, Aria, have been gone, I have had the unpleasant experience of seeing roughly a dozen and a half comments asking, "Where is the next chapter?"

Excuse you.

First of all, it's rude to ask that because it makes it seem like expectations are being set down, which, ahem, they're not.

Second of all, if you were to READ THE FUCKING AUTHOR'S NOTES, you would know we had a trip since the last update and would be updating July 8th. It was in our own self-interest to push the update date back once more due to the sudden news of Techno's passing, and we also updated the author's notes.

For the comments we got that said "It's July 14th! Where's the update??" (believe it or not, we got those), if you were to READ THE AUTHOR'S NOTES, ONCE AGAIN, you would notice there's a LITERAL TIME OF UPDATES. WE UPDATE AT 9:30 AM EST - 10 PM EST. It is stated. Many fanfic writers do not do this. Do not ruin this for the other readers, because I get so incredibly tired of seeing those comments when we have given you all the information you need.

Thank you. Now let's get on with the story.

"He who is brave is free."

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca

When she was very young, Drista had been put in a room with a working bomb and given three hours to disarm it, or it would blow up. She had never known if that was actually true—she had, of course, disarmed it in time, *duh*—but she'd never actually disarmed bombs in the real world, on her own ship. Still, she'd been prepared for this moment from those months taught by a grey-robed Feline telling her to *hurry up*, to go *faster*, because time would never be on her side.

So when she saw the bombs in the engine room, she didn't exactly panic. She walked towards them instead, the only thing changing the slight increase in her breathing. Her hands did not shake as she grasped the tiny thing that could end the lives of everyone onboard.

She unhooked the red wires of each delicate bomb with the tips of her fingernails, breathing a little bit easier when they stopped blinking red. There was a detonator attached to them somewhere—and she didn't know who had it or when it would blow. Sweat began to trickle down her forehead as she worked, moving through the engine room.

Drista was just moving to the main reactor—the most dangerous and explosive part of the ship—glad that they hadn't yet gone off—when she heard a footstep behind her. She didn't pause, letting the person—whoever they were, they weren't a friendly—sneak up on her, thinking they had an advantage. Her hand twitched towards the practice sword strapped to her belt, suddenly annoyed she hadn't grabbed Techno's sword when she'd had the chance. Clearly, the person behind her didn't have a phaser, or she'd be dead already.

When they were five feet from her Drista spun in one smooth motion and drew her sword, barely managing to parry the swing of a second sword. It slipped in the grip of her sweaty palms and she cursed inwardly, adjusting it automatically. Her trainer would have started screaming at her.

Her blood ran cold as she stared into the red eyes of her brother.

"Very *smart*," he panted out with a grimace, and she didn't like that coming from someone so obviously mind-controlled. It would have been better had he been silent.

Drista pushed him away with a kick to the knee and he took it like a professional—he *was* a professional; both of them were. Suddenly the end of his sword looked wickedly sharp; for unlike hers, it was very, very real. "Dream," she breathed out.

"Surely you are not that stupid," the Egg laughed behind her brother's face; her brother's eyes. He swung the sword again, and Drista parried it once more, jumping backward before his knee could take her in the chest.

"I know you're in there, Dream," Drista said, blinking back tears, and knowing her treatment of her brother versus Technoblade was unfair—that she was willing to negotiate with the Egg behind Dream's eyes and she'd been willing to *kill* Techno. "Please. Fight it."

"He's only Human," the Egg said condescendingly, and Drista dived into a roll, coming up into a swing that her brother laughed and blocked with ease. He knew every move that she would make. He had been taught the same things, after all, or he had taught her later on. It hadn't seemed like such a problem, then. Now, Drista wished that she was more versed and wasn't so easily readable. "*You're* only Human."

"Humans are powerful in their own right," Drista snarled, remembering vividly a conversation she had what seemed like ages ago with Tommy on Icarus-45HB.

The Egg smirked. "I can hear his thoughts, you know," it said. "I can read his past. I know that he fights so hard to be seen on a ship of *better*, more powerful Origins. I know he's fought so hard for his place, and for *you*."

"Other races aren't *better*," Drista snapped, her spine straightening. "But anyone is better than *you*."

"Oh, really?"

Drista ducked to avoid the next swing of the sword but gasped as Dream's other hand caught her ponytail, spinning her around and slamming her against the wall of the reactor, knocking the breath from her, as well as the sword from her hand. She distantly heard the metal clatter

onto the floor as she squeezed the tears from her eyes and tried to scrabble for a grip to push Dream away.

Her brother had always been stronger than her. She'd always been glad of that, before—he had always been her best protector—but now she was frightened that he would kill her.

"Dream," she gasped out. "Dream, I know you're in there. You have to *fight it*."

The Egg hissed, and Drista flinched at the spit that hit her face from their close proximity. "Nobody is fighting *anything*, little girl," it spat. "Nobody has managed to fight me—besides those accursed Phantoms—" Drista paused in surprise before she resumed trying to bite, kick, or scratch Dream away from her. Dream grabbed her wrists and twisted them behind her back, slamming her chest down onto the floor of the engine room. Drista coughed—was that blood?—onto the ground as Dream used his weight to keep her down.

So much for her being powerful. So much for her being *anything*. Tommy could've stopped Dream's heart. Lani or Tubbo could withdraw weapons or bombs from their fourth-dimensional space. Hannah or Phil wouldn't even *be* in this position due to their wings. George or Harvey could've scratched them with their claws. Techno was stronger than just about everyone—Dream couldn't have ever hoped to pin *him* down.

So in the end, she was only Human.

"Dream," she coughed out. "Please. Listen to me."

"Dream's not here," the Egg screeched, and Drista let out an involuntary sob. "You have such *pretty* blonde hair. If I ever had a physical form, I think I might've wanted hair like you."

Drista froze, unable to find the words to fight whatever *that* meant.

"Pity, it will be stained with blood." It paused. "Dying by your own brother's hands. How poetic."

Drista let out a scream of anger and hate, and finally managed to kick Dream away by hitting him in the balls—whoops, sorry Dream—and apparently the Egg could feel that, because it loosened its grip enough for her to roll away, choking, out of breath, but alive for now.

She wondered distantly how long that would last. How long she could keep fighting before she collapsed.

She had to duck another swing of the sword, unable to grab hers, because Dream stood between her and an unsharpened weapon; yet the only weapon available was on the floor behind him, and it would've been better than nothing.

"DREAM!" she screamed, blinking back the blurriness in her eyes. "FIGHT IT, DAMN YOU! FIGHT IT! WIN!"

She managed to parry the next one by ducking under Dream's swing and grabbing his wrist, his knee coming up to hit her pelvis. Drista choked, but kept her grip on the sword, managing to twist it out of his grip exactly as he'd taught her to do against an armed opponent. The sword clattered to the ground, and Drista, feeling the blossoming pain in her hip, kicked it away with her right foot. It skidded to a halt near her own.

"*Bitch*," the Egg snarled, furious.

"I *am* Human," she choked out, as they grappled for each other's throats—as Drista caught site of the single bomb she hadn't managed to disarm, blinking a bit more rapidly on the side of the reactor. "And... you... *lose*."

"I will not lose to one of your kind," the Egg growled. Drista shrieked as it managed to knock them both to the ground, straddling her stomach. There was a knife in his hand, a glint of silver descending in an arc towards her head, and Drista realized with a shock she'd forgotten that Dream carried as many weapons as a spy should—that is, to say, many. And her hands were pinned at her sides, and she was doomed.

She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable death, but after a second of nothing, snapped open her eyes again.

The knife was centimeters from her face, and Dream's eyes were a brilliant green, horror reflecting in them as brother stared at sister and wondered what he had been about to do.

"Drista," he whispered.

"Dream," she breathed out, relief filling her.

Dream shook his head, and his eyes flickered red, the horror fading to sharp anger. Drista shrieked and kicked him off, scrabbling for his sword—the sharp one—and turned around to see him kneeling on the ground, his hands on his head. His eyes were green again—but cloudy. "Drista—" he gasped out. "You have to run. Get out of here."

"I can't leave you," she whispered.

"Wilbur—is going to blow the *L'manburg* up," Dream said through gritted teeth, letting out a low groan as he fought the will of the Egg. "You need to—disarm the—*FUCK*—bombs."

Amazing, how in the end, despite the Egg saying how weak Humans were, it was a Human that fought it—and beat it, in the end.

Also, Wilbur *what now?*

Drista gaped at him, and then turned, her hand clasping the bomb on the side of the reactor as she struggled to demilitarize it, her hands, slick with sweat, striving to follow the simple technique to disarm the rudimentary explosives.

"Hurry," Dream gritted out, and Drista bit back a snarky retort. "I can—I can *feel* him slipping."

Well, she didn't even want to know what that meant.

Drista let out a small squeak of relief as she finally managed to undo the wiring, throwing it away like it was—well, like it was a bomb. She spun back to Dream, who was now sweating profusely, his pale face redder than perhaps was medically okay. "Dream," she said. "Dream, you've got to fight it."

"I *can't*," Dream said, his hands shaking. "I—I can't, not for long, Drista."

"You can't give up," she said. "Not like that."

"Kill me," he said.

"What?" she said, startled. "No!"

"You can't let me live," Dream said, his green eyes overflowing with tears. "I don't want to die, but...I—I would rather die than kill any one of you. We're all fighting this, and we're all losing."

"No," she whispered. "No, you're winning. You're *fighting* it, Dream. Your eyes shine green."

Her brother shook his head, sweaty hair clumping over one eye. He clenched his fists into tight balls and picked up the dagger, sliding it over to her. Drista inhaled sharply as she picked it up. This was his graduation dagger—the one his trainer had given him the moment he had graduated from Aghra Votella. "You have to kill me, Drista."

"You can't ask your sister to do that," she whispered brokenly, curling her hand around the hilt that said his name in the only secret language she'd ever learned.

"I'm not asking my sister," he told her softly. "I'm asking a fellow spy to do the right thing. I'm asking for mercy."

Drista remembered his blood-red eyes and shuddered slightly as her brother's voice came to mind, talking about how beautiful her *hair* was. She made a face of disgust, and Dream glanced away, ashamed.

"I can't do this," Dream said. "We—*we* can't do this. We can see what we're doing, you know. We—we can—" he shut his eyes, his face contorting with another low groan, and Drista saw them flicker red for a brief moment before they returned to green. "We can see the monstrosities we're causing."

"You can't ask me to do this," she whispered.

"I can," Dream said. "And I am."

"That's selfish!" she cried out. "It's not fair!"

Dream's eyes snapped up to meet hers. "If the Egg chooses to kill you, then all of you will die. It has its...metaphorical eye on you, now. It will go for the kill. I cannot—I cannot kill my little sister."

"Well, I can't kill my older brother!" she snapped, and yet...she found herself drawing nearer, the dagger clutched fiercely in her right hand.

"I am proud to call you my sister," Dream told her, raising his head from where he knelt on the ground. "Know that. I will *always* be proud of you, Drista."

Her lower lip trembled. "Is this how it ends, then?"

Dream gave a short nod. "You must survive this. Do better than I, at least. Be better than me."

"I'm scared," she whispered.

Dream closed his eyes, and a single tear trickled down his cheek. "I know," he bit out. "I am so proud of you, sister. But to save your friends, you must kill me. You cannot allow me to hunt them down. You know I was made for that."

"You were not made to be anything!"

"Now that's a lie," Dream said, smirking slightly—which was weird, because he was crying at the same time. "I have done many terrible things."

"Each of us—each of us," she breathed out shakily. "Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

"You have grown wise."

"Experience tends to do that," she said, tilting her head.

Dream smiled at her. "I'll help you," he said, as she knelt in front of him. He grabbed her hand and weakly pressed the tip of his own dagger against his heart. "It—it won't *let* me do it on my own, otherwise I never would have asked."

She didn't bother asking who *it* was. They both knew.

"I'm losing my mind," she murmured.

Dream smiled at her, sad and understanding. "I lost mine the moment I attacked you."

Drista took in a sharp breath and made her choice.

The button straight up didn't work.

It was almost surreal.

Tommy was staring at Wilbur's hand as the Phantom lifted his finger from the controller in confusion when the entire fucking ship didn't blow up—actually, Phil and Techno were both staring at Wilbur as well.

"What the—" Wilbur said, blinking at it. "I *set* them properly," he muttered to himself. "I *know* that."

YOU HAVE FAILED.

"Shut up!" both Wilbur and Tommy snapped at the same time.

Tommy raised his phaser back towards Techno and Phil, who had been slowly advancing, their eyes still red. "Don't fucking move," he snapped. "Or I'll shoot you."

"Liar," Phil hissed at him.

"I don't lie," he said, lying, and he could almost hear Purpled laughing at him from wherever the boy was—hopefully alive. "Search his memories. You'll see that."

There was a pause, and Phil cocked his head, his black wings perking up from where they'd been half dragging on the floor—surely something that the un-mind-controlled Phil would *never* have let happen to his precious feathers. He blinked rapidly, and Tommy swore on every God he believed in—which was none, actually, so maybe he should just swear on his life, which was worth nothing, so actually... never mind—that Phil's eyes flickered blue for a half-second before they were red.

MEMORIES?

Tommy breathed out, glancing over his shoulder at Wilbur. The Phantom was comically pressing the button repeatedly, as if doing something over and over and expecting different results wasn't the definition of insanity or something. It was almost comical. "Yes," he said. "Memories."

Then Tommy reached into his own head, tapped past the muted bond that belonged to—

—it wasn't muted anymore.

He paused in his own mindscape, staring up at the bright glowing bond of Valkyrae, which by all means, should've been dull and merely shimmery, since she was supposed to be hundreds of lightyears away.

Not, you know, seemingly less than a few *dozen miles*.

WHAT ARE YOU —

Tommy ignored the weird feeling in his chest and passed Rae's bond in his mindscape to the only other one he had, ignoring the broken ones that he'd once shared with his father and mother, who had both let theirs go before they'd died to spare him any mind-numbing and potentially lethal pain.

"Techno," he whispered. "Get that damn scrambled pile of *bullshit* out of your head."

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Tommy opened his eyes and found himself staring directly at his eldest brother, who looked conflicted—or, well, as conflicted as *Technoblade* could ever look—his forehead wrinkles slightly scrunched up in confusion. Beside him, Phil was a frozen statue, like the Egg had stopped controlling him to focus solely on the exchange between Tommy and Techno.

I WILL NOT LOSE ANOTHER HOST, TOMMY INNES.

Another? Tommy thought distantly, then shook his head. Now was not the time to be thinking about anything than the present. He tilted his head. "Techno," he whispered. "Techno, come on." He stretched his own influence down their bond, and was met with a rigid wall.

But every wall could be torn down.

"You have to fight it, Techno," Tommy said, reaching out his left hand. Techno stared at him, seemingly unimpressed. Phil took a step closer, and Tommy raised the phaser in his other

hand, double-checking that it was set to stun—it was, thank God. "Phil, if you take another step, I'll shoot you."

YOU WOULDN'T SHOOT YOUR OWN FATHER.

"I thought you said I didn't *have* a father," he spat. "Also, it's set to stun, you sick fuck." Tommy glanced over his shoulder, where Wilbur was still obsessively pressing the button over and over. He had a feeling he probably would've been laughing at that if he didn't have a twenty-foot-tall egg to his right and a phaser pointed at his adoptive father. "Techno, please. Remember me."

REMEMBER? YOU WANT TO REMEMBER? I'LL SHOW YOU REMEMBER, AVIAN.

Tommy got the feeling he wasn't going to like this.

When the egg released what looked like spores into the air—mainly directly into his face, and immediately the edges of his vision went black, he *knew* he wouldn't like this. He put his arm over his nose and mouth, but it was already too late, and in front of him he saw Phil coughing, his feathers splayed widely in panic. Techno crumpled to his knees. Tommy couldn't even *see* what happened to Wilbur.

He saw the ground rush up to meet his face.

Blinked.

Then he was standing in green grass and breathing in fresh air, staring at a crash field of escape pods as smoke and screams wafted through the air. Even as he watched, clutches of

Piglins stumbled into view, some of them bleeding, their red and pink hair singed at the tips.

Tommy ran over to the nearest escape pod and reached to grab the hand of the child that was trying to climb out of the burnt remains, and took a startled step back when his hand passed right through the kid's.

"Hello?" he asked carefully, not sure if the kid understood Standard.

The kid ignored him—completely; like he hadn't even noticed him—stumbling out past him towards two older Piglins, one of which picked them up and hugged them to their chest. Tommy stared at them when they didn't seem to notice the only non-Piglin in the mix of dozens of survivors.

He wasn't a ghost, was he?

There was a flash of symbols on the side of the escape pod, and Tommy turned to read the Standard symbols with partially fearful eyes.

The *H.M.S Fran*.

Wait, what? These were the escape pods of the *H.M.S Fran*?

Tommy turned his eyes towards the blue sky, and slapped a hand over his mouth when he noticed the small speck in the sky that could only be the remnants of an explosion.

Had he time traveled? Was he in the past?

"HELLO?" he screamed, sprinting towards the small group that was coagulating in the middle of the crashes.

"Ėwà'y ustm'ày urry'hày e'fõrebày eyth'ày endsày and'inglày ein'for'cementsr'à!" the leader was saying. Tommy had no fucking clue what he'd just said. It was definitely Piglish, in the same gruff voice that Techno used when he muttered or cursed in his native tongue. He tried to push his way through the crowd and found he was basically intangible, and nobody seemed to notice him.

Tommy panicked. "HELLO?" he screamed again, his voice catching halfway through and breaking.

No, no, no. He could not be trapped in the past as a *ghost*. There was no fucking way that stupid scrambled Egg knew how to time travel.

Tommy exited the crowd and backed away, jumping a bit when he stumbled over the fallen body of a Piglin, who clearly hadn't made the trip.

"A'mây?"

Tommy whirled, the word *Techno* rising in his throat as he recognized the much lower voice of his brother—and halted when he saw the boy standing in front of him.

Because it *was* a kid.

And it *was* Techno. But not *his* Techno.

Actually, Techno looked just under Tommy's age, his hair only about two inches longer than his shoulders and in complete disarray, blood trickling down his temple. The corner of one of his tusks was chipped, which Tommy knew was now filled with gold inlay and covered in a sort of tusk ring. He hadn't known that this was how it had broken.

He had also never seen such fear in his older—younger?—brother's eyes.

"Techno," Tommy breathed out.

Like the rest of them, Techno didn't see them as he limped towards the circle. "A'mày?" he repeated, in that same desperate tone.

Mother, Tommy realized.

He was calling out for his mom.

"I was quite pathetic, wasn't I, as a runt?" Techno said in Tommy's ear.

Tommy jumped about two feet, reaching for a phaser or a knife that wasn't there. Techno was standing next to him—older Techno, the one that Tommy knew and loved. His eyes were red, but they weren't *Egg* -Red, they were Techno red. "Techno," he said again, relief flowing from him.

"Hello, Tommy," Techno said, the corner of his lip turning downwards as he looked around. "Where are we?"

"I don't know," Tommy said, glancing over to stare at the group, which young-Techno had joined. "I—this is the past, is it not?"

Techno tilted his head. "This was the worst day of my life," he said simply—he had always said things as they were. "I lost my Ma."

"You—" Tommy said.

Techno smiled sadly. "She was in a different escape pod," he explained. "Merikh Rience blew it up when he tried to destroy all the escape pods. She never landed. Not like this poor sod." He gestured at the downturned body of the Piglin on the ground in front of them.

"You've never talked about it," Tommy told him, wincing painfully. "I'm sorry."

"Eh, the past is in the past," Techno said, shrugging it off. Tommy wondered just how much he was hiding.

"What the—"

Tommy spun to see Wilbur standing there, his eyes a normal coffee brown. "Wilbur!" he said.

"Oh, my Gods, Tommy—" Wilbur said, rushing to him and hugging him. "I am so sorry, I don't know what I was thinking—"

"You remember?" he asked.

Wilbur nodded frantically. In the background, Techno tilted his head as if in agreement. "I—we can see everything—sometimes we can see *each other*—it's so fucking weird—I am *sorry*, Tommy, I don't—"

"It's fine," Tommy interrupted. "Wilbur. Please."

"What the *hell* is going on?" Phil's voice asked, and Tommy shoved past Wilbur to rush at the Elytrian, who swept him up in a hug so tight he nearly had the breath knocked out of him.

"Tommy," his adoptive father said breathlessly. "You're okay."

"Never better, old man," he said, blinking back tears. "Where do you suppose we are?"

"Memories," Techno grunted out. Everyone looked at him, and he blinked rapidly like a deer caught in headlights. "Well, we're obviously in our heads, right? Time travel doesn't exist."

"It might," Wilbur said optimistically.

Techno rolled his eyes. "It doesn't exist, Wilbur." The Phantom huffed but didn't argue a second time. "So the Egg has trapped the four of us in our memories."

"Well," Wilbur said. "Where's this one?"

"This is the day the *H.M.S Fran* exploded," Tommy said, when Techno didn't answer, turning to stare back at sixteen-year-old younger-Technoblade, a semi-fond look on his face. "This is the day that both of us lost our parents."

"You lost your mother in this explosion?" Wilbur asked Techno, wide-eyed. "You never told me that!"

Well, at least Tommy wasn't the only one.

"I don't like to talk about it," Techno said flippantly. Wilbur opened his mouth like he was going to argue, but Phil brushed him with his wing and he fell silent. After a moment, the half-Piglin spoke again. "I have always mourned in silence."

There was a pause, and then Wilbur let out a small cry. "Oh my God, *Tubbo*."

Oh, they didn't know.

Techno's shoulders seemed to slump as he gave a harsh flinch. "I killed him," the half-Piglin admitted, and he sounded more broken than when he'd said that his mother had died in the aftermath of the *H.M.S Fran*. "I did."

"Mate—" Phil started.

Tommy opened his mouth to argue as well—to tell them that Tubbo was alive, not dead, but then there was a rush of blackness and the scene around them changed.

And then suddenly Tubbo's miraculous return from the dead didn't seem like the most important thing anymore.

a house of memories

*"Maybe this world is another
planet's hell."*

- Aldous Huxley

There was an Elytrian with tattered black wings and a cloak pinned around his shoulders that had holes for said wings, standing in a dark jungle with only a torch in his left hand. He had a sword in his right hand, and a burning torch—like, an honest-to-goodness *flaming torch*—in his hand.

"Hello?" Tommy asked, though this time he was smart enough not to expect an answer.

The Elytrian didn't turn, raising his torch higher to cast light across the dense jungle as he squinted into the underbrush, the hammered sword—it wasn't as clean as Techno or Dream's, Tommy noted—glinting in the firelight. He sighed and stepped forward, his ashen wings lifted just high enough to brush against the ankle-high grassy foliage the ground was made of. Tommy moved to follow him, feeling slightly freaked out by the chirping of unknown bugs and the consuming darkness around him, untouched by light pollution or *any* sort of technology. The Elytrian didn't seem to have a Galactic Rebellion uniform on, nor any proper outfit of any time—in fact, the closer Tommy drew to him, as the other humanoid walked sort of carelessly through the forest, the more sure he was that the other one was wearing the dyed skin of some animal.

The jungle ended abruptly, giving way to an ocean, and the man hummed semi-familiarly—Tommy couldn't place it—as he stepped onto a wooden bridge that floated on top of the dark waters.

Really creepy.

Tommy gaped when he saw where the Elytrian was heading—a hole *in the middle of the ocean*, surrounded by sheets and sheets of hammered glass, or something like it—and a blue crystalline temple in the middle, sitting on top of sand that had once sat at the bottom of the ocean floor.

"Oh my God, it's Jesus," he muttered under his breath as he hurried to peer at the shining glow of some crystal-type lanterns that made the temple glow with light. "He parted the fucking *sea*."

"Not quite, mate."

Tommy jumped about a foot in the air, putting a hand over his heart when he saw Philza standing there, an amused look on his face. "Jesus Christ, Philza Minecraft, you could give an Avian a heart attack over here."

Phil nodded in the direction of the other Elytrian—who, come to think of it, looked a lot like Philza himself. "Have you ever read the reports on my Hardcore missions?"

Tommy blinked. "Were those the ones where you got marooned four separate times?" he asked dumbly. "They're classified." If he'd really wanted to invade Phil's privacy he would've gotten Purpled to grab it for him, or Tubbo to hack it. He had a bit more decorum than that, though.

Phil smiled fondly. "Yes," he said. "This one was the longest—five years. And by far the most memorable."

"You—*huh*?" Tommy sputtered. "You've never told me that! I thought it was, like, one year! Tops!"

"The first one was over thirty years ago," Phil said honestly. "I'd honestly forgotten what it had looked like." He put his hands on the railing atop the glass walls around the temple,

watching—holy shit, that was younger Philza Minecraft?—walk down the stairs. "Beautiful, isn't she?"

"Who?" Tommy asked.

"Flowerfall," Phil said, and Tommy squinted down and saw the dotting of trees that seemed to be bearing fruit or flowers of some kind around the edges. "The remains of a long-extinct species. Nothing but carvings on the walls, now." He nodded at the ancient temple, and Tommy noted the indecipherable hieroglyphics that seemed to be scratched into the pillars of the temple.

Out of the corner of his eye, Tommy saw Wilbur and Techno walk up, the two seemingly also memorized by the brilliant shining colors coming from the creation that Phil had named Flowerfall, of all things. Both the Lieutenant and the Commander seemed to be at a loss for words. "You were abandoned here for *five years*?" Tommy gasped out finally. He couldn't imagine being on Pogtopia for five years. He couldn't imagine being anywhere, alone, for five years. He'd barely survived the Wasteland as it was.

Phil shrugged. "I thought I would live off the rest of my life here," he said honestly. "I'd just met Kristin, too. Promised her my little adventures would never happen again." He held up his hand fondly, his ring glinting off the light into a thousand shimmering colors tinged with love and fondness. "How very wrong I was."

"She waited for you," Wilbur said.

Phil laughed. "She did," he said frankly. "God—this was eighteen years ago. Older than you, Tommy." Tommy snorted. "She was twenty when I vanished. I'd hoped that she'd married someone that wouldn't have made her wait. But she waited for me because she'd hoped that I would come back." Phil shrugged, seemingly casual, but there was a tenseness in his shoulders. "I think she would have waited forever."

Tommy made a face. "Ew."

Wilbur slapped him in the back of his head. "Shush," he chided. "Philza Minecraft is very old. Let him reminisce."

"You little shit," Phil said fondly, rolling his eyes.

Tommy rubbed the back of his head. "So...this was your most hated moment, then?"

Phil glanced up at the sky. "Today was Kristin's twenty-fourth birthday," he said. "It was pretty bad. I—" he cut himself off. "Nevermind." Techno glanced at him worriedly, but Phil didn't meet any of their eyes.

"I'm beginning to sense a pattern," Tommy said, with a growing pit of dread in his stomach. "These memories—they're our worst days, yeah?"

"...yeah," Wilbur agreed slowly.

"Oh, fuck," Phil sighed.

SMART.

All four of them jumped as the voice reverberated in their heads.

"OI!" Tommy screamed at the sky. "YOU STUPID FUCKING SUNNY-SIDE-UP BITCH! LET ME OUTTA HERE!"

ARE YOU SURE YOU DON'T WANT TO REMEMBER THEM, TOMMY INNES? ARE YOU REALLY CONTENT TO LET THEIR FACES FADE FROM MEMORY?

He froze.

The world faded to blackness.

He blinked, and there was a brown-haired boy with horn-wired glasses crying on the Fleet school's steps—again, like young-Techno had been, about Tommy's age. Seventeen or eighteen. There was a crumpled note in his palm, and a cracked guitar next to his feet, the remnants of a broken song fading into the wind. The San Franciscan sky was cloudy, as if it, too, understood that young Wilbur—for that was who it was—was mourning something, and it grieved alongside him.

"Ah," Wilbur said, and Tommy expected it enough not to jump this time. He looked up at the older version of this boy and was surprised to see *his* Wilbur's eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Why did it have to pick this memory?"

Tommy swallowed, throat feeling dry. "What—uh, what happened?" Pink hair and black feathers flashed, and Techno and Phil were there as well, the other two wordlessly watching this younger version of Wilbur sob over some illegible words written on a scrap of paper.

Wilbur took in a breath and let it out. "My girlfriend committed suicide," he admitted.

Tommy's jaw dropped. "I... I didn't know," he sputtered. "I'm sorry."

His sorry hung in the wind before blowing away, pathetic and unworthy. Compared to the bomb Wilbur had just dropped—metaphorically, of course—it was small and tiny and meant nothing.

Wilbur smiled sadly, shoving his hands in his pockets as he ducked his head. "Why do you think we were never *so* mad that you had your secrets, Tommy?" he asked, attempting and failing to keep his voice light. "We all have our own." Tommy swallowed and glanced at Phil, who dipped his head, and Techno, who held his gaze before Tommy dropped it, looking back at the brown-haired younger version of himself. "Her name was Sally," Wilbur added after a moment, a touch sadly. "I was going to propose to her the next week."

"Oh," Tommy said, feeling like a blubbering idiot.

"She was a Merling," Wilbur continued like he'd wanted to tell Tommy before and just hadn't. "And Merling society is incredibly sexist towards their females. The ones that escape their oppressive social structure are usually vociferous and endeavor to be the exact opposite of the people they'd been attempted to be molded into." Tommy's mind flashed to Niki, the loud and flamboyant Merling who had always seemed so powerful in his eyes, and his heart clenched at her loneliness. Then there was Liz, his female Merling classmate that had died because of him. "Sally was—well, she was very beautiful." Techno snorted. Wilbur glared at him. "Shut up Technoblade. Anyway, she was... wanted by a lot of Merling males back on Atlantis. They were all mad that *I*, a Phantom, had gained her attention instead of someone they deemed worthy. Her family disowned her because she chose to come to Fleet school to be a navigator." Wilbur smiled fondly, glancing up at the sky. "I once told her that I'd wanted to map the stars with her."

Tommy, Techno, and Phil were all silent. How could they not be?

"But losing your family..." Wilbur let out a small breath, giving Tommy a side-eye, who stiffened. "No matter how terrible they were to you, being *disowned* by them—well, she'd always had a lot of mental health issues. It just got worse from there. But she was always happy with me, and maybe things would get better. Things changed when groups of Merlings began visiting her, trying to get her to change her mind. They said a lot of horrible things. Threatened her. Me." Wilbur shrugged. "I didn't care, but I know she was scared for me. I think it was too much, eventually."

Tommy watched a tear trickle down Wilbur's cheek, and remembered the gun in his hands pointed at his head and a blonde-haired boy screaming at him to pull the trigger so they both could die in the end. Suddenly he was very glad he hadn't done that.

"I was supposed to be performing for that stupid talent show," Wilbur muttered. "The one that you performed in, Tommy, all those years later." Tommy stiffened slightly. "She told me to run ahead. That I'd see her in the crowd. I never saw her in the crowd."

"Wil," Phil said, reaching out a hand to draw the Phantom into a hug as he let out a stifled sob.

"I found her in our dorm," Wilbur cried into his father's chest, and Tommy stood there with Technoblade at his back and wondered when he'd gotten so bad at helping people. "And she was so *cold*, and I loved her, I *did*, and she died anyway..."

"Wil," Phil said, then stopped, at a loss for words. Wilbur didn't seem to care, seemingly content to sob on his shoulder as the wind howled around them and the boy on the stairs sobbed for a newly-lost love.

"Those we love don't walk away," Tommy began in a low voice. "They walk beside us every day. Unseen, unheard, but always near, still loved, still missed, and very dear." Phil and Techno both gave him confused expressions, and Tommy shifted on his feet. "Ranboo used to say that," he said in a small voice. "I'm sorry, Wilbur," he added.

"It never gets easier, does it?" Wilbur asked him quietly.

"Never does," he admitted, remembering what he'd told Tubbo all those months ago. "The burden gets easier to bear, though." The wind changed, and Tommy took a deep breath.

The world faded to black, and Tommy held his breath for half a second because he didn't want to open his eyes and smell and see because he *knew* what was coming—he had to; his life had been a tragedy from the day he was born.

The first thing he smelled was smoke.

Tommy opened his eyes and found himself standing in a half-burnt square, towering over the people around him. He blinked, glancing around in surprise. He remembered everyone had seemed so tall—but now they were all around Tubbo's height or shorter. The stage in front of them was empty, but Tommy glanced at the lack of a certain blood splatter and knew in his heart what was about to happen.

The children's faces were gaunt, their arms too thin, and their hair stringy and limp from lack of proper nutrition. One might've thought that in a square full of a few hundred children—that was all that was left, by this point—there would've been some laughter, some nudging—some under-the-breath joking around.

Not in these times.

"I've seen more cheer in a graveyard," Techno muttered from where he appeared next to Tommy.

"Techno," Phil hissed.

"It's so silent," Wilbur whispered—and even at a whisper, his voice carried like an echo.

Tommy glanced up at the blood-red sky, and at the fields of dead grass and burnt-down buildings around them. On one of the burnt-down storehouses, he could just make out the words *Tell Freedom I Said Hello* in bright orange spraypaint, not yet dried. He clenched his fists by his sides and scanned the crowd.

It was not that difficult to find himself.

Tommy pushed past the children to stand by himself—the smaller, younger, filthy, and starving version of him, anyway, whose hair was short and unkempt and whose skin looked like it was about to fall off his protruding bones.

"This is horrendous," Phil said, and Tommy turned to look at him as the Elytrian looked around at the children with wide starving eyes and at the remnants of what had once been a joyous school-town. "There's so many..."

"There's so few," Tommy corrected. Phil, Techno, and Wilbur all looked at him sharply. He gave a sharp sort of smile. "There used to be over three thousand of us, remember? Now there are only a few hundred." Three hundred and forty-nine, to be precise. Three hundred and forty-six would die today.

"Gods," Wilbur said under his breath. "Is that *you*?"

Tommy stared down at the boy next to him, whose lower lip was quivering as he blended into the crowd. "Yep."

"You look—" Techno cut himself off before he thought more carefully about his answer. "Terrible."

"What happened *was* terrible," Tommy commented, inhaling and exhaling slowly so that a panic attack wouldn't overtake him as he stared around at the square and the kids he knew would die in the next dozen minutes.

"Where are the others?" Phil asked.

Tommy pointed towards the mountains. "Purpled and Ranboo are in our cave."

"...and Alyssa?" Wilbur asked in a small voice. "Foolish? Grian?"

Tommy stuffed his hands into his pockets and tried his best to maintain a straight face. "They'll come to us. You'll see." By the nauseated look that flashed across Wil's face, he didn't think the Phantom wanted to see.

He didn't know if *he* wanted to see.

The building next to the stage opened with a loud bang, and about half the children in the square jumped, a few screams erupting from them before the sullen silence returned. No bugs rustled, no birds chirped. It was eerily and horrifyingly quiet.

Tommy had almost forgotten the silence. Aboard the *L'manburg*, there was never not something running or humming. Out here, everything was dead or dying—the grass, the animals, the people.

There were nine guards in their dirty white and black uniforms and faceless gazes. There were three kids—fifteen, sixteen, and eighteen years of age.

Foolish was out first, his green eyes burning with pain and unimaginable anger, and the younger-Tommy let out a small whimper before the person behind him—one of the older kids, he thought, Human, with blonde hair done up in a messy ponytail and dark shadowed eyes—elbowed him in the back to shut him up.

He didn't really blame them, honestly. He thought her name might've been Ace, or something of the like. The eight-year-old Merling girl cowering at Ace's side with a makeshift breathing tube running up her face that looked like it'd been fixed more than once with duct tape. There was an Elytrian on the Merling's left; Clubs or Spades or Hearts; whatever deck of cards they were named after—they had all been a makeshift family, once, just like the Children's Rebellion—and just like all things in Pogtopia that had burned, so too had their family. So too had the Children's Rebellion, so too had thousands of children from all different origins, and so too had many hundreds of friends.

After Foolish came Alyssa, led out on the stage, fresh cuts littering her face from where she'd obviously tried to fight back, her hands and cheeks splattered with the bright orange spray paint, and there was no sadness in her eyes as she was forced to kneel next to Foolish, her Feline ears pressed back against the back of her head. There was no sadness, no pain. There was only hostility and triumph written there. Tommy looked at her bleeding hands and watched as they dripped blood onto the stage from where the guards had ripped her claws out.

Then came Grian, whose lackluster purple-grey feathers were bound behind him—he hadn't been able to fly for days, though; lacking the strength to do it.

In the end, that was why he hadn't been able to escape.

He saw young-Tommy first, making eye contact as he pressed his lips into a hard line. Unlike Alyssa, there was only understanding written in his soft brown eyes, as well as the sad emotion he easily identified as acceptance.

"Gods," Wilbur whispered.

There was a flash of movement on one of the unburnt buildings' balconies. Tommy already knew who it was before he peered up at it, but young-Tommy—who was not yet prepared for this—looked like he wanted to murder Chroma.

"That fucking bastard," Phil muttered under his breath, clearly having seen Chroma as well.

But none of them could change the past, only direct the future, and there was nothing Tommy could do.

"Kneel," Chroma said in a flat voice, directing his voice towards the stage.

And to the end, they fought.

The members of the Children's Rebellion did not kneel until the guards put their hands on their shoulders and forced them down with the strength of someone that had enough nutrients to walk and sustain muscle mass.

Had their stomachs not been panging from hunger, had their muscles not been weary and their brains foggy; Tommy had no doubt they would've fought tooth and claw to the end.

But this was months later. And it took a while for spirit to break, but eventually, it always did. Always had.

Young-Tommy moved forward to save his friends whose sentence had been set the day that Chroma's list of names had been released. The Human behind him, Ace, grabbed him, wrapping their hand around his stomach and pulling him back before he could rush into a suicide mission.

He wished he had thanked her, before the end. In the moment, he had felt hatred for the person—but she had saved his life, in the end.

There was silence in the crowd.

This was not the first time this had happened, but it would most definitely be the last.

"The Children's Rebellion," Chroma sneered. "How pathetic." Techno glared at him with brilliant scarlet eyes—and if looks could kill, then the Avian would drop dead. Phil's wings bristled, murderous, and Wilbur kept looking at young Tommy like he wanted to reach out and tug him close, to protect him from the scene that everyone knew was coming. "You steal food from those worthy—you sentence others to death!"

"They just wanted to survive," someone muttered under their breath. Tommy had never known who, but now, he spotted Hope Marigold, a Blazeborn—she'd been part of a rare family of four that had all come to the Red Planet together, seeking refuge from their family. Standing on blood-soaked dirt, Tommy knew that right then and there her siblings—all three younger; and he cursed himself for not remembering their names—were already dead and gone, buried, if one could even call it that, in the mass graves that would surround Pogtopia forever. The eldest had survived, though by the look in her eyes, he knew it hadn't really been her choice or wishes.

There were so many children with so many stories, and none of them would ever live to tell them.

"I was foolish," Chroma admitted.

"Nah, I'm Foolish," Foolish said loudly, and the guard behind him dug his fingers into his shoulder until the Phantom yelped and shut up. Alyssa didn't twitch an eye, but Grian stifled a smirk by biting his cheek until blood dripped down his face. The crowd shifted, a few giggles ringing out from the younger kids before the older kids stifled them with a few well-placed hushes.

Tommy hadn't remembered that happening. He'd blocked most of it out except for the shots and the noise and the bodies and the smell of blood. Techno snorted, and Phil looked horrified—like he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Chroma ignored everyone but himself, which was pretty typical. "I shouldn't have expected children to understand that what I'm doing is for the greater good," he said, shaking his head sadly. Wilbur hissed under his breath. Both Tommy's stared at him wordlessly, one with future knowledge and one with quiet horror. "If you could've just *listened*—" he slammed his hand down on the railing, and several kids jumped. Tommy himself winced alongside his younger counterpart. "—then maybe all of this would be fixed. If you could've just left those up to the adults, to those that know better—"

"Fuck you, bastard," Tommy said out loud, despite nobody being able to hear him but the people he would meet long after Pogtopia became a monument to the Red Planet's Genocide. "Fuck you. I can't believe I'd once held you to the same standard as Sam and Phil."

Both Wilbur and Phil looked at him sharply. Techno didn't move. He'd already known.

"—then maybe we could've saved more," Chroma seethed.

"Are you done yet?" Wilbur asked him, sounding tired.

"If it wasn't for those meddling kids," Tommy mocked at the same time in a high-pitched voice. "Fuckin' asshole."

"The Children's Rebellion," Chroma repeated again. He was angry. It took everything in Tommy to stand his ground—and whether he would've punched him or ran, he didn't know. "*Rebellion*. Pitiful. All you did was ruin the lives of your peers."

"You did that, don't worry," Grian said amicably. Despite speaking in a normal tone, his voice *carried*. "Not us."

Chroma stared at them. "Kill them," he said dismissively, turning to leave. Tommy might've let out some sort of pathetic noise. Young-Tommy definitely whimpered.

There was a pause in the air as a hundred children drew in their collective breaths. In that pause, the guards tighten their grips on their triggers. But they do not fire directly, for a reason Tommy will never know. The pause continues.

And so the members of the Children's Rebellion committed one last act of mutiny.

Alyssa moved first—she had always loved too fiercely and angered too easily. It would be the cause of a historical moment, in the end. And so she raised her left hand over her head, eyes burning with enraged fire, and opened her fist to display the sign of the Children's Rebellion. Three fingers up, two folded down.

She was filthy, dirty, shaking, and starving to death, and she'd fought every step to the end, even if that hadn't included her claws and her teeth.

Foolish and Grian followed her—their hands at different heights, different shades of bruised and blood, but still forming the same symbol that would burn its way into Tommy's head for the rest of his life, as well as into the history books for all time to come.

The hand sign was well known. It was spray-painted onto every door Alyssa could reach; every free space, every crate, and every rock. Everyone knew what it meant, even if the guards forced the kids still in Pogtopia to wash the paint off the walls when the red sun rose in the mornings. Nobody spoke about it, but everyone *knew*.

There was another second where everything was paused—where the sun, low in the sky as it set, sprayed blood into the clouds and into the air and set over once-golden fields, paused in its descent. Where Alyssa's hand stays in the air with Foolish and Grian's, where the light of an old star shone its light on the members of the Children's Rebellion and whispered *wait*, and everything came to a grinding, screeching halt, the world alight with fire and smoke and blood and victory written in the eyes of the defiant ones.

Write that down, the historians mumble, peering into the cameras that are watching the scene. *This is the last act of the Children's Rebellion.*

Then that moment ended, and there were three gunshots, all in unison. Three gunshots, three children, and three bodies on the stage, blood leaking into the wood—joining the dozens of other executions that had once taken place on that horrible, awful stage.

Tommy felt a tear trickle down his face. Foolish's eyes were still open from his fall, but Alyssa looked like she was sleeping. Grian's body was obscured by his wings, like a coffin where he lay.

Chroma waited for the children to clap, because that was what they were forced to do after every execution. Some of the kids even raise their hands expectantly, waiting for the first, so they too can join in.

But Tommy looked around at the crowd and knew that some of them had had enough. He looked at his younger self, rooted in his spot, and staring at the blood that slowly pooled under the heads of his now-dead friends, and saw the breaking point of the Children's Rebellion, both physically and mentally, that had turned into the children's last stand; the last rational act of the children of Pogtopia. The last act of defiance, the end of so many lives—for every story had an end, and out of three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three; three thousand, two hundred and seventy stories had ended in Pogtopia, the final few pages written for those today.

"By all the Gods Above," Phil said under his breath, his hand over his mouth. Wilbur was straight up crying. Techno couldn't even look at the scene, his eyes cast to the cloudy heavens.

Three adults in a crowd of children sentenced and convicted long before their time by a judge, jury, and executioner who had decided their fate when he should have called for aide. Three adults in a crowd sentenced to death.

But Tommy watched flatly because he was the only one alive that could remember it. Tommy did, the image burning into his eyes and forever tinging his nightmares, because nobody else would ever be able to.

He was not the first to mirror Alyssa's sign. He wasn't even the second. He didn't even think, in the crowd of a few hundred-something children, that he was even in the first dozen.

Someone in the back was first. Tommy couldn't see them from where he was standing.

And like a wave, they all followed.

Ace removed her hand from holding back young-Tommy to put her fingers in the sky, and after a few seconds, their Elytrian friend followed their movement. Little Ohf, the eight-year-old Merling, raised her hand too, though it could not be seen from her small stature. Tommy turned to face the majority of the crowd and saw children like Hope Marigold raise their hand for their lost siblings; saw children like Rowan Atkinson, whom he had once shared a history class with, raise their hands for remembrance; saw children like Emylee Karthen, a fellow pilot-in-training—never to fly in the mountains like she'd wanted to—raise their hands for the stars; saw Eiy'd'hen Wa'hey'te, an Elytrian with feathers like Phil, raise their hands for a family that they all would never see; saw children like Hanna Santos, who had lived longer than most at Pogtopia and seen the stars in the night sky, raise their hands for a life that they would never get to live out.

Hundreds of children, of where there had once stood thousands, their boots and bare feet squishing in mud that held the blood of thousands. The air stank oppressively from the mass graves that nobody bothered to cover, because there were more added every day.

Tommy followed his younger self to the sky, his hand far above all the others, as he stood there, one of two still living members of the Children's Rebellion. He did not expect it, but Wilbur, Phil, and Techno raised their hands too, three clumsy adults standing in a crowd of children who drew in breaths and waited for their punishment with pounding hearts.

We should not have lived. Not when so many people deserved it more.

There was a silence that lingered. Heads turned towards Chroma, waiting for a reaction. The Avian stood there, his face twisting furiously. The guards around the edges of the children raised their guns.

"Kill them all," he spat and did not wait to see if his order went through, turning on his heel and stalking away.

It did.

Panic blossomed in the heart of a crowd of almost-survivors as blasts of bullets killed the *rest* of them; killed the rest of Chroma's hard work—because he had known that he could never control a group of people that had banded together, not when they outnumbered him, not when, had they been more careful, more organized, they could have taken him out with more survivors.

Had there only been less fear. Less kids to protect. Less older siblings curling themselves around their younger kin and praying that their sacrifice would not be in vain.

It always would be.

Young-Tommy shoved through the crowd and was gone in a burst of Avian speed. Tommy watched him tumble through the line of guards, scrambling along the corner of an orange-spraypainted colored house.

He was almost numb to the children that fell around him.

Wilbur gasped and tried to reach for Ace, the closest, as she went down coughing in a fit of dust and dirt and blood, the bullet taking her straight through her chest; not an instant-kill

shot. Her Elytrian friend stumbled up to her, the still body of the small Merling girl they'd once considered their sister behind her—Ohf *had* died instantly; a peaceful death, in Tommy's opinion—placing their hands on Ace's chest to stop her from bleeding out.

They bled out anyway in a matter of seconds, blood filling their lungs and erupting from their throat to trickle down their chin.

The Elytrian—Spades, yes, that was their nickname—collapsed on top of them, their eyes open and empty as a bullet takes them in the back of their head.

Wilbur let out a small cry as they all died in that square, turning to look frantically—as if there was anything he could do.

Tommy stared at the three in sorrow, and moved on because he had to.

Phil was next to Emily Hunty, a Phantom medic-in-training, as she worked furiously to try to drag away Max McKenzie, an eleven-year-old Feline boy, who had been hit in the throat.

They both died anyway, because they were all destined to, covered in dust and blood and bearing nothing but rebellion in their chests.

Techno stood over Amei Pa, a Terran, who has tears glistening on her face as she cried out a name in a language Tommy didn't know, her words lost to time and memory. Catherine Gill lay next to her, an Elytrian had blood staining her white feathers, her neck twisted in a wrong way. She died too.

They all did.

Tommy looked around and saw Hope crumpled on the ground, Rowan face-down in the dirt of the square, Emylee curled in on herself in fetal position when she'd tried to will the pain of a bullet away, Hanna, who had died nearly instantly, her fingers still curled in the symbol that had inevitably killed them all—dozens of people he'd once known by name, shared classes

with, raced and won against—seen across golden fields while lunch was being eaten—many hundreds more that he would never know the names of and never identify their cause of death.

They would all join the mass graves surrounding Pogtopia, save for the members of the Children's Rebellion, who would be strung up like some sort of sick display, as a message to the remaining three survivors in a genocide born of blood and rebellion.

It felt like years. It took less than a minute.

Tommy stood with the horrified crew of the *L'manburg*, his fists clenched at his sides, and stared at the dead and the dying—at the hundreds of people who had died because of a symbol he had made.

"I did not deserve to live," he said aloud. He felt like maybe he should be crying or screaming and shouting—but he had felt those emotions all his life, *acted* on those emotions all his life, and here, in the square, after having just watched some of his best friends die, he felt numb and empty.

"Don't say that," Phil said sharply. "*Never* say that, Tommy." He stepped towards him and grasped his hand, bringing him closer—and here, close to Phil, he felt safer.

Wilbur might've said something, but he was gaping like some sort of dead fish, frantically trying to whirl around to stare at everyone and everything. Techno was staring straight at one wall of guards, his teeth clenched like he wanted to attack them, as his hand grasped for a sword that wasn't here, not in this place.

"Tommy?" Phil asked, cupping his face gently with his callused palms. Tommy wondered if they came from all his years of Hardcore.

"It's my fault," he whispered. "Always been."

"No," Phil said. "Never, Tommy. Never." He drew in a breath. "I love—"

There was a pause. Tommy screamed as Phil's eyes turned red, and he pushed him back, running into Techno, whose eyes were less scarlet and more crimson. Wilbur was gone, probably because he couldn't be controlled.

YOU HAVE GONE THROUGH SO MUCH STRIFE, TOMMY INNES.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT FUCKING MEANS!" he screamed. "GET OUT OF THEIR GODDAMN HEADS!"

THEY ARE MINE. ALWAYS WILL BE.

Tommy glared up at the red sky, reached into his mind and through his into Techno's, and *tugged*. "No," he snarled. "They're *mine*."

There were bodies on the stage that would be strung up for nobody at all, and they'd been his first family—but nothing would steal his second family while he still drew breath. Not even the Universe itself.

and he said broke, and so it broke

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Freedom is never given; it is won."

- A. Philip Randolph

Avian bonds were a funny thing. Unlike Elytrian bonds, their documentation had long been mislaid to nothing more than theories and brief sentences poorly translated from a lost language nobody could really piece together more than certain words.

One thing that everyone could agree on, though, was that Avian bonds, unlike Elytrian bonds, were only between Avians. Sam had let his go with Tommy so the shock wouldn't kill him. Clara had let hers go with Tommy weeks before she'd died.

That'd nearly killed him anyway.

Valkyrae had once explained that Avian children were especially susceptible to accidentally creating bonds with the people around them, which was why they were family-only for the first few months of their lives.

Yet Tommy had still found a way to create a bond with Technoblade that blocked the voices of his ancestors. Tommy had done the impossible by creating what they had—Tommy had always done the impossible. It shouldn't have been conceivable. It shouldn't have happened.

It had. His middle name should've been Impossible, in that sense.

The memory flickered as Tommy launched his attack through his friend, his *brother*, and then they were all lying on the floor of the cafeteria.

Tommy wasn't so adept at mind-attacks. That just wasn't something he was doing, not technically. It was more like communicating with Techno and feeling the massive oppressive *thing* that was sharing his mind space and poking at it. Really hard.

He saw Techno stumble to his feet, a hand on his temples. Confusion and pain were written on his face. At his side, Phil rolled over, his wings arcing around himself protectively in his still-unconscious state.

"Get," he gasped. "Out. Of. His. Head."

NO.

"GET OUT!" he screamed, ripping and tearing at the shadows that lined Techno's mind as sufficiently as he could—which admittedly wasn't very well—and he watched Techno's eyes flicker from Egg-red to Techno-red, his eyes a haze of confusion as he locked eyes with Tommy.

"Tommy," Techno said. "Stop."

And Tommy stopped because that wasn't the Egg speaking; that was his brother.

The Egg attacked, going from offense to defense in a quarter of a second, through Techno's mind to Tommy's bond, the string of golden light that connected them going from strong to frayed to broken in the time it took Tommy to blink.

Then there was another presence in his mind, neither the Egg nor Techno, screaming at him. And Tommy was on the floor, and there was blood leaking from his nose as his mind delivered the most pain he'd ever been in in his entire life through his heart and soul.

It was said that the sudden breaking of a bond could kill you from the shock.

Tommy passed out, his head slamming against the metal, and wondered if they were right.

Purpled

There was a ship outside, lights flickering in all its metallic glory as the viewport of the *L'manburg* swung around to see it fully. Purpled didn't know how long it had been there because the radar hadn't been working and it hadn't been in sight of the bridge until a few seconds ago.

There was blood in his hands and anger in his chest, but a smile twitched on his face as he beheld the sight of the *Mira*, which had come despite no message being sent; had come to save them all.

He just hoped that it had made it on time.

Drista

With tears in her eyes and sorrow written in her heart, Drista gripped the dagger in her hands, the larger and rougher hands of her brother on top of hers, and prepared to kill him. She would deal with the trauma later. If Tommy could, so could she.

"STOP!" someone shouted. A semi-unfamiliar voice.

Drista was so startled—damn, her spy instructor would have been mad—that she stumbled back, the knife clattering to the ground in front of her. She whipped her head around to see a male Human security officer with the customary green slashes designating his rank, his phaser raised in his hands.

Instead of the Hardcore heart, there was a small black and white ancient Terran television with a smile as his insignia.

The emblem of the *Mira*.

There were two people behind him—a second Human, a young medical officer who had a bag around her shoulders as she glanced around like someone was going to jump them. She had dyed lavender hair that was dark brown at the roots, and her hands twisted nervously as she met Drista's eyes. The third person in the lineup *was* someone that Drista knew decently well—Corpse, the Chief Communications Officer, his dark hair wild as he turned his phaser towards Dream—

—Dream, who was creeping up behind her, his eyes a mad, terrible red, and Drista screamed, grabbing for the knife—but there were two knives on the floor, and she missed both of them
—

—a shot rang over her shoulder. Drista scrambled on hands and knees towards her brother as three sets of footsteps raced towards her, desperately feeling for a pulse as she heaved him on his side, scrambling for a pulse.

"He's stunned, Drista," Corpse said, but she ignored him until she felt his heartbeat jump under her fingers and fell back, sobbing wildly. The medic caught her before her head could hit the ground again.

"He fought it," she sobbed, knowing she was babbling and absolutely sounded delusional, but could not care less. "He—he was Human, and it said that Humans were stupid and would never be any good, but he was the only one that fought it, and—"

"Drista," the medical officer said. "I'm going to need you to calm down. Your BPM is far too high."

"How high, Celine?" the security officer asked.

"One sixty-four," Celine, the medical officer, said, brushing her hair out of her eyes as she forced Drista to lie flat on her back. Corpse moved past her, grabbing something from Celine's bag to crouch by Dream. A bright light flashed in her eyes—was that a penlight?—and Drista groaned, reaching a hand up to shield them.

Except she didn't, because the security officer was holding her arms down. If Drista were less tired, if her adrenaline hadn't started to run down and her head starting to pound, maybe she would've fought it harder.

Her stomach roiled, and Drista threw up. Celine helped her—gross—holding back her hair—God, she wanted to chop it all off after the comments that damn Egg had made—as she spewed up what she'd eaten in the last twenty-four hours.

Which was basically nothing. It was all stomach acid.

"Are your ears ringing?" Celine asked kindly. To the security officer, she said in a murmur Drista probably wasn't supposed to hear, "Her pupils are dilated."

"Wha—" Drista mumbled, feeling excessively dizzy. "No—"

"How many fingers am I holding up?" the security officer interrupted.

"Abe," Celine sighed.

Drista squinted at him. The lights hurt her eyes. "Four?" she guessed, because, frankly, the room was spinning and all she wanted to do was close her eyes and sleep.

"Definitely a concussion," Celine said grimly.

Drista scoffed. "I'm a spy, I don't get concussions."

"Uh-huh, I'm sure you don't," Abe said under his breath.

"What're you even doing here?" Drista slurred, blinking up at them. Damn, they were getting blurry. "Did—did Purpled get a message to you?"

Celine blinked at him. "No," she said. "Someone else warned us first."

Drista didn't have the energy or time to ask as her eyes rolled back into her head and she blacked out.

She had shot Niki through her heart.

No, wait. No, she hadn't.

Lani scrambled for her mentor, who was lying face down next to the table, a nasty cut on her head from where she'd hit her face on the glass. Her breathing tube was slightly askew, and definitely not up to regulation—she had, after all, ripped it out—but Merlings were called Merlings in Standard for a reason, because they were like mermaids from Terra's historical fairytales; like fish, and they had their hearts near their lungs; about where Lani's bladder was.

Not on the right side of her chest. Not like Humans. Not like nearly every other Origin.

Lani tore Niki's shirt open and gazed with horror at the bleeding, oozing wound that looked like someone had burned her and cut her open all in one go. A close shot like this was enough to kill from the shock—but water was still traveling through Niki's breathing tube, so the Merling was *alive*, if barely.

The safe room door slid open again, and Lani raised her phaser, firing off another shot before she realized what she was doing. Thankfully, the people standing there had enough experience to dodge it—or maybe she was a terrible shot.

There were four of them, and Lani recognized two of them very well and vaguely recognized the other two enough to name them. Relief flooded through her so heavily that her limbs felt like they were in puddles as she gasped and collapsed to her knees, the adrenaline fading from her system.

They were part of the crew of the *Mira*.

The *Mira* had come to save them—which, if Lani thought hard about it, didn't make sense because there was no way that they'd come right as Purpled had sent that message, but their eyes weren't red, so she pushed that thought away for a later date.

There was a security officer, with the green slashes—John, maybe, another Merling, holding a phaser as he scanned the room, eyes narrowed in search of enemies—the Chief Science Officer, Jodi, an Elytrian, her white wings like an angel's coming, and then the two that Lani knew very well—Hafu, the Helmsmen, and one of the only other Shulkers she spent time with, and finally Brooke, the Chief Medical Officer aboard the *Mira*.

Brooke went right for Niki, her eyes narrowed in concentration as she felt first for Niki's heartbeat and then looked at Lani. "She'll live, it just looks messy."

Lani stared at her. "I know," she said and then winced. "Sorry, that was rude."

"What happened in here?" Hafu demanded as Brooke directed Jodi to start bandaging Niki's chest while she took a look at Tubbo on the table, her eyebrows furrowing with worry.

"The Egg," Lani choked out.

"The *what*?" Hafu and John asked at the same time.

"Like the breakfast?" John asked.

"Like the mind-controlling twenty-foot tall alien organism that made the adults attack us," Lani snapped.

"...attack you?" Hafu asked cautiously. "Like imposters?"

"No, it's them," Lani said, understanding Hafu's caution instantly, though technically speaking, she wasn't supposed to know about that. "They're just mind-controlled."

"What happened to *him*?" Brooke interrupted. Hafu snapped her mouth shut as Lani climbed to her feet to stare at Tubbo. "He shouldn't be alive."

Lani swallowed. "Techno stabbed him through the gut with his sword," she said as Brooke lifted up the toilet-paper wrappings she'd used to bind the stab wound. Hafu cursed under her breath. "Purpled did CPR, and Tommy breathed air back into his lungs."

"Commander Technoblade stabbed him?" Jodi asked.

"I've seen Rae do that once," John commented at the same time from where he was standing by the door like some sort of guardian. "Make the lungs work, I mean," he clarified after a moment. "Not stab someone. Although I'm sure she would."

Lani let out another breath. "I didn't—I didn't have proper medical tools," she cried out, and Hafu put a hand on her shoulder to steady her. "I had to stitch him up with a needle and a thread."

"You *hand-sutured* a sword wound closed?" Brooke asked, raising her eyebrows. "That's incredibly impressive." While she talked, she was already reworking Lani's shoddy handwork and attaching an IV to Tubbo's arm for fluids—things Lani should've had but hadn't.

Lani shrugged miserably. "It was just about all I had in my *Torak-Khogari*," she muttered. "That and some bandages, but not enough to change them as often as I had—"

"Lani," Hafu interrupted. Lani looked up at her, which wasn't that far. "I'm sure you did all you could to save your brother."

Brooke turned to Jodi. "I need you to comm Jack and get him to bring in a stretcher."

"He'll live, right?" Lani asked desperately.

"Yeah," Brooke said after a moment, her hands already stained with blood as she put pressure on Tubbo's sluggishly bleeding wound. "Whether he'll wake up, though..."

"Brooke!" Hafu snapped.

"She's a nurse," Brooke snipped back. "She'd want it how it is."

"I do," Lani said, dipping her head shakily. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

Brooke returned her smile. "Of course, Ensign." She tilted her head. "What I *don't* understand is how he didn't bleed out. You said Commander Technoblade stabbed him with his sword. This wound looks hours old. *How* did he not lose all his blood? How long has it been?"

"Um," Lani said. "I don't know. Approximately ten hours?" She cursed herself, knowing that she should've timed it better, should've *been* better. Hafu clearly knew her train of thought because her hand tightened on her shoulder. "And he did bleed out," she added. Brooke looked up sharply, her brown-green eyes focusing in on Lani. "Thankfully, we have an Avian. Universal blood donor. Nearly forgot about it, too."

"It was just the six of you children?" Jodi asked, frowning.

Lani bit her lip until she tasted blood. "Five," she corrected. "Ranboo died a while back. Chroma killed him."

There was a bit of an awkward silence. John flushed red and turned away, putting his communicator up to his mouth.

"R-right," Jodi said, glaring at John. "We heard about that."

"You did a very good job, Lani," Brooke said kindly, glancing at John, who was speaking into his comm unit under his breath and very apparently not looking at Lani.

"What about the Egg?" Lani asked. "How are you not affected?"

Hafu cleared her throat. "The cafeteria is being dealt with," she said cautiously.

"What if they try to kill you?" Lani cried out. "We have to go help them—"

"No," Hafu said. "Trust me, Lani," the older Shulker said, when Lani glared at her. "They'll destroy the Egg."

"They won't!" Lani said. "All the people in this ship couldn't, and—"

"The People of the Universe can," Jodi interrupted. "The H'arly'sha D'orthr'akyi."

"The what-now-who?" Lani blinked.

Hafu smiled. "In standard, that's Starborne," she said explained kindly. "The Starborne have come to help." There was a fantastical glint in her eyes as she said that, like she couldn't believe what she was saying.

"*What?*" Lani cried out, reeling back from the shock. "They're a fairytale!"

"They are not," Brooke said solemnly. "Though I do not know whether that will be good or bad, in the end."

Valkyrae

Valkyrae felt Tommy die.

She was the Chief Security Officer, and so she should've known and followed protocol to its core, no matter what happened—so had her vows foresworn—but she felt Tommy die and so she ignored everything to ram her shoulder into the doors of the cafeteria, her phaser in her hand. She broke through, because it was locked, and stumbled but didn't fall. She faltered when she saw the giant pulsing monstrosity that, weirdly enough, was shaped like a massive pustule-covered egg.

One of the Starborne was right by her left shoulder, moving calmly despite her own erraticness though his eyes looked like there were nebulae forming in them as he stalked towards the monstrosity that made Rae pause—God, that thing was massive.

When 'Scott' and 'Jimmy'—what odd names for celestial beings—had shown up in the *Mira* four days prior saying that something bad was going to happen to the *L'manburg*, Toast had been extremely skeptical.

But they were, after all, Starborne.

And you didn't *not* listen to bajillion-year-old beings. Okay, maybe they weren't *that* old, but whatever. So Toast had ordered their course towards the *L'manburg's* estimated area of travel, and Valkyrae had clenched her hands and prayed that the Starborne were wrong.

They hadn't been. Of course they wouldn't be; they were fairytales incarnate who could apparently predict the future.

Roughly twelve hours prior, the *L'manburg's* beacon had switched off, which meant either the ship was gone or it had been disabled. Fortunately, it had been the latter—Rae had known

Tommy wasn't dead, after all—but there had been a moment of panic when Corpse had reported that the beacon was no longer transmitting that everyone thought they had been too late.

Scott had said that the thing attacking the *L'manburg's* crew would not hurt the people of the *Mira*. Valkyrae had entered the ship with her crew at her heels and one of her flock members by her side and had told herself that nobody would be dying today.

WHAT IS THIS?

Rae gasped, pressing a finger to her forehead at the unexpected mental communication. Sykkuno paused on her left, his brows furrowing, and Toast, Peter, Miyoung, and Scarra faltered. Scott and Jimmy looked unbothered.

There was a small groan that wasn't from their small group, and Rae's eyes fell upon Tommy, who was lying on the ground, unmoving. Commander Technoblade and Captain Philza were on their feet, staring at Rae's group with really creepy red eyes. Oh, so that was what Jimmy had meant by mind-control. Lieutenant-Commander Wilbur looked unsteady, but he didn't look mind-controlled either, which was weird. Rae scanned the red monstrosity of an alien egg-lookalike and saw several bricks of C4 on them that hadn't exploded yet, making her blood run cold.

WHO ARE YOU?

Rae opened her mouth to speak, but Scott put his hand on her shoulder, and she shut up. Right, let the celestial beings do the talking to the massive thing that was taking up an eighth of the room and had someone managed to mind-control the formidable members of the *L'manburg*.

For a second, her mind flitted back to the sound of screaming around a table at the dozens of the crew members of the *Mira* as they shouted at each other, trying to figure out who the villains were at a table of heroes. Who had been replaced by alien creatures with every memory and ability of the people they had replaced.

But no, this wasn't that incident.

"Go help your flock," Scott told her softly, and she shifted, glancing at Philza and Technoblade, who had weapons and were certainly willing to kill her. "Go! They won't bother you."

Rae swallowed and ran towards Tommy, Sykkuno flat on her heels. She flinched slightly when Technoblade moved toward her.

"**Stop,**" Scott said, the word reverberating throughout the room. Technoblade stopped. The word wasn't directed at her, and so Rae slid to her knees at Tommy's side, feeling for a pulse.

There wasn't one. She took a breath and reached down their bond, grasping the remains of his soul as tightly as she could.

"What's wrong with him?" Sykkuno gasped, having followed her.

"The Commander broke their bond," she said, turning to cast a watery glare at Technoblade, who wasn't paying attention to them anymore as Scott and Jimmy stepped towards them and the alien creature. Toast and the others stood near the door, half of them looking at her and Syk worriedly and the other half watching the Starborne work with wonder in their eyes. "He's suffering from SBB." She held out her hand to her flockmate. "I'm holding onto his life force, but fortunately it's not a real bond, so if we replace it, build it stronger..."

She would be calm. She was the Chief Security Officer who had a flockmate dying in her arms, and she would be calm. She had trained for situations. She was a member of the Galactic Rebellion.

She had screamed at the top of her lungs at a meeting table and they had thrown her out of the ship anyway. She had never been calm.

"I accept," Sykkuno said instantly, understanding her undertones, and putting one hand on her and one on Tommy. Both of them closed their eyes in unison as Rae felt for the one-sided shattered fragments of Tommy's bond to Technoblade that the Commander had broken.

If the Commander had been an Avian he would've been dying too, but it hadn't affected him. Cleary.

The Egg screeched in her head.

GET AWAY FROM ME!

"I don't think so," Jimmy said, as Rae carefully began repairing the bond and attaching them to Sykunno's offered one.

Slowly, a glowing string began to snake through Tommy's mind, the shattered fragments disappearing into his mindscape. Rae breathed out a sigh of relief and continued.

THEY HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS! THEY ARE MINE! I DID NOT ATTACK ONE OF YOUR KIND! YOU HAVE NO PLAY IN THIS, AHSRAKI!

So it seemed alien creatures even had stories of the Starborne. Interesting.

And slowly, slowly, Tommy's mind solidified, and Rae dragged him back from the darkness to the light, one tug at a time.

Come on, Tommy. Come back.

"You messed with the Avians," Scott corrected, his voice a thousand times brighter than a star, which was a weird comparison, but Rae didn't have another one. If it had been directed at her, she was sure it would've hurt. **"The youngest-born Avian, so they say."**

WHAT?

"You know the prophecy," Jimmy said, following it up with a Word that had to be a Title or something because it made Rae wince and see white in her eyes. **"We are the People of the Universe. You threaten it with your very existence. You threaten him."**

PLEASE —

"Goodbye," Scott said in a voice that almost sounded cheerful, if celestial beings even had cheerful emotions.

Also, prophecy? The fuck?

Rae looked up in time to see Scott and Jimmy raise their hands and say a Word—a Word of all Words or some shit.

She blacked out, but the last thing she did was drag Tommy a bit closer back to the light.

One last tug before the end.

Purpled

He raced down the hallway, crashing into someone from the *Mira*—a security officer, by their green slashes—who grabbed him, saying something that he didn't understand. Purpled took every ounce of self-defense training he had—which admittedly wasn't much—and slammed the security officer into the wall, grabbing his phaser and pushing past him.

He'd definitely just broken a few legal laws.

He didn't cast a single glance back as he ran towards the cafeteria, dodging a few more *Mira* crew members—Jesus, this place was worse than an anthill—all who tried to grab him and miss. Sucked to suck.

Purpled burst into the cafeteria, hit Captain Toast of the *Mira*, who had, for some reason, been lying on the ground, went flying onto the floor, dropped his phaser, and looked up to meet two people that made him finally, finally stop.

"Hello, Purpled," the first one said, smiling at him.

Purpled didn't even ask how they knew his name. They *would* know. The entire universe probably fucking knew. He glanced past them, and then around at the cafeteria, confused

when he didn't see the Egg or the red vines anywhere. It had *literally* just been there. He had *heard* the explosion! There weren't even any scorch marks!

"TOMMY!" he yelled, when he saw the boy lying face down on the ground, the other two Avian imbeciles—Sykkuno and Valkyrae—next to him. He pushed past the weird purple-haired fuckheads—or would've, but suddenly they weren't there—and rushed to his friend, accidentally tripping on Techno's leg and making the half-Piglin groan from where he had been unconscious.

Actually, everyone had been unconscious, except for the two weirdos who had known his name. As Purpled rushed closer, he saw Rae sit up, heaving Tommy over onto his back and placing her hand on his chest, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath through her nose.

A hand grabbed him before he could continue. "Don't try it," Toast said as Purpled struggled against him. "They're saving him." Unfortunately, Toast was captain for a reason, which meant he was stronger and better than Purpled at self-defense. And attacking. And holding people down.

"Let me *go*," he growled. Toast grunted as Purpled managed to jam his heel into the other Human's shin. Unfortunately, Toast did not listen to his very reasonable demands. Damn, he wished he had his phaser. He would've shot him. With a stunning bolt, of course. He wouldn't ever shoot a captain of the Galactic Rebellion.

Of course not.

Rae finally looked up. "He's alive," she said firmly, looking like she was about to fall unconscious again. Sykkuno quickly switched sides to prop her up, and Rae sent him a thankful look.

"What—" a voice said, and Purpled looked to the left to see Phil sitting up, rubbing his blue eyes. *Blue* eyes. A pair of officers rushed over to him and Techno—Purpled identified them instantly with a quick close one-over: Miyoung, a twenty-five-year-old Feline nurse who had been added to the crew of the *Mira* after it was reinstated—and Scarra, a thirty-two-year-old science officer, and also the second half-Piglin, after Techno, to join Fleet school. He'd been

older than Techno, of course, when he'd joined, but it had still been a memorable message for Techno to get. Not that Purpled screened everyone's mail or anything.

Scarra was half-Piglin, half-human. Purpled studied him for a moment before dismissing both of them as a threat—and steadily ignoring the eye contact Phil tried to maintain as his gaze passed over the Elytrian Captain to Lieutenant-Commander Wilbur Soot, who was still unconscious, but judging by the lack of panic on his medical attendant's face; alive. Purpled dismissed him as well and looked back at Tommy, Rae, and Sykkuno. Toast finally released him with a small huff, and Purpled ran towards his friend, kneeling down and feeling for his pulse.

"You don't trust me?" Rae asked tiredly, but there was a small smile plastered on her face, and she didn't sound mad. Just tired.

"I don't trust anyone," he responded, his voice clipped.

Rae huffed. "Not even him?" she asked, gesturing at Tommy's unconscious body.

Purpled barked a short laugh. "*Especiall*y not him," he said, brushing a strand of blonde hair out of his friend's face. "One time I had to stop him from shooting himself with a phaser." Rae and Sykkuno looked horrified. Purpled ignored them, smiling fondly. "Don't worry, it was a while ago."

"I—" Sykkuno started, cutting himself off.

"What happened to him?" he asked, after surveying Tommy. "I don't think Techno stabbed a kid. Again. Did the Egg do this?"

He disregarded looking at the half-Piglin, who had definitely heard him, and Phil—both of whom looked frustrated that Purpled was ignoring them. He pretended he didn't want to pick up the phaser Rae had dropped near her folded legs and shoot—sorry, *stun*—them. Just. You know. Just in case. Even though the Egg was gone.

Which, again, was weird. Giant organic mind-controlling eggs didn't just disappear.

"Tommy is suffering from SBB," Rae explained. "Sudden Bond Breakage," she clarified when Purpled gave her a flat explain-that-to-me-in-Standard look. "Commander Technoblade broke the Avian bond between them. Or, well, I suppose the...the Egg?" Purpled nodded. "The Egg broke it through him. Unlike Elytrian bonds, Avian bonds should only be broken gently or through death. They hurt like hell if the person on the other side dies, but if the person on the other side breaks it is alive, the whiplash can kill them both."

Purpled scowled at Techno. "Than why is *he* conscious?" he spat.

Techno looked offended. "It's not my fault, kid," he said. "Calm down."

Purpled ignored him, concentrating on Rae, who was at least willing to explain things to him.

"He's not an Avian," Rae said slowly. "So it *can't* affect him. He doesn't have the mindscape for the whiplash *to* affect him. He is quite literally not capable of it." Techno grunted. Rae glanced at him quickly. "No offense," she added. Techno's ear flicked, but he didn't respond.

"But Tommy's alive," Purpled prompted.

"Yes," Rae said, returning to focus on him. "Because the bond was primarily one-sided, I was able to attach it to Sykkuno instead, thereby stabilizing him."

"Good," Purpled said, swallowed his pride, and continued, "thank you."

Rae smiled kindly. "Of course," she said.

Purpled looked at the ground where the Egg had been, and then looked at the two people who were neither wearing *Mira* uniforms nor *L'manburg* uniforms. "Who the fuck are you two and how the hell did you scramble the Egg?"

The first one looked at him expressionlessly. Purpled swallowed back the uneasiness that rose in his chest. The second one rolled his eyes slightly.

"How did you know?" the first one asked finally.

Purpled snorted. "Well, nobody else in this goddamn room is capable of snapping their fingers and making an organism and its roots go *poof*." He made an explosion sound with his tongue. "I mean unless Captain Philza has suddenly gained the ability to use magic or something. Which I don't think he did, otherwise he wouldn't have attempted to kill all of us." Both Philza and Technoblade winced. Purpled really could not have cared less unless it was Chroma. "And I don't think that the Egg grew legs and walked away."

"We are the Starborne," he—it?—said. "We have come for him."

Purpled looked at where Starborne Number Two was pointing. "Oh, *hell* no," he snarled when the finger led straight to Tommy. "You are not taking him out of my sight—"

"Relax, Child of Man," Starborne Number One said. "We are not removing him from your capable hands." He looked amused. Purpled wasn't sure. Starborne were fairytales, after all.

Techno coughed. "They uh—they scared off Chroma on the beach after the whole *Benecia* mess," he said. "Them and that Charlie character. The—the, uh, Sl'ymă. Cleared my mind of the voices for a little bit too."

"You didn't say that," Phil said, sounding hurt.

Techno grimaced. "I wasn't sure if I was supposed to. Tommy was injured."

Purpled snapped his fingers. It echoed in the near-silence of the cafeteria. "Oh," he said. "That reminds me." Everyone looked at him. "My brother, Punz. He might be dying on the bridge."

"*Might?*" Miyoung asked, her voice cracking. "And you didn't mention this earlier?"

"I forgot," he deadpanned. "I was worried about Tommy."

About six people looked like they were going to say something, but none of them said it. Not that Purpled would have responded, anyway.

Toast dipped his head. "Miyoung, Sykkuno, go get Punz, please." Both crewmates nodded. Toast turned back to Purpled, addressing him matter-of-factly. Ah, Purpled liked this guy—always got straight to business and didn't bother with those pesky emotional responses. "What happened to him?"

"I hit him in the head with a metal pipe," Purpled said nonchalantly. "About ninety miles per hour, I'd say, speed-wise."

Miyoung paled rapidly. "In the gut?" she asked, already gathering her stuff up.

"Oh, no," Purpled said, keeping his anger and fear deep below the surface of his skin so it would not show. Not here; not in front of all these people. "He killed Ca'jat and Mellohi." Phil cursed under his breath, and Techno visibly winced. "He had a phaser. He was going to shoot me. I hit him directly in the skull with my swing. You taught me well." He addressed the final sentence to Technoblade, who looked uneasy. "Always make sure you bring them down in the first swing, yeah?"

Techno didn't answer. That was probably for the better.

"O-oh," Miyoung said. "Are you sure—"

"Miyoung," Captain Toast said warningly. Miyoung dipped her head and nodded, leaving, Sykkuno shortly on his heels. She only looked *slightly* concerned for his mental health.

Purpled perked up. "How are Drista and Lani?" he asked.

"Ensign Drista has a concussion," Lieutenant-Commander Corpse said as he entered the cafeteria, dipping his head at Toast in greeting. "She is unconscious, but being treated for it. We found her about to... kill Dream." Techno raised his eyebrows in surprise. Even Purpled frowned. Had he bet on that, he would have assumed that she would've died before she would've killed her brother. Apparently, child spies were more resilient than they let on. Corpse frowned to himself before continuing. "It appears that he was able to... fight the thing's control."

"Humans *are* the most stubborn of the Origins," Starborne Number One spoke up calmly, his hands clasped behind his back.

Purpled's lips twitched with a smirk that he managed to repress. "Evidently," he agreed.

"I received word from Hafu that Lani is alive and well," Corpse continued, skirting the Starborne slightly, like he was afraid of them. Purpled scoffed. "She shot Lieutenant Nihachu through her chest, but fortunately Merlings carry their heart in their guts, so your CMO will make a full recovery." The last part was directed at Phil, who had looked about one second from jumping up and going straight to her.

"What about Tubbo?" Purpled asked. Tommy would want to know that.

Techno winced, closing his eyes. Purpled was surprised to see a tear trickle down his face.

"Um... isn't he dead, mate?" Phil asked quietly.

"What?" Purpled said with a scowl. "Fuck no. Tommy brought him back to life, donated blood, 'cause Avians are celestial blood donors, and Lani stitched him up with her bare hands." Phil and Techno looked shocked at this statement. Guess they hadn't known.

"Quartermaster Purpled," Toast said, and Purpled snapped to attention. "As the most... rational person here," he started, wincing slightly at his own word choice. "On your side of the story, I mean—I would like a full report of your account on my desk by 0200."

"Toast, let him rest—" Phil started.

"I don't rest," Purpled said coldly, and Phil flinched. "Of course, Captain," he told Toast. "I'll have it on your desk by 0100, actually. Don't you worry."

"I always do," Toast said with a sad smile. "Especially around this ship."

Chapter End Notes

WOW! Nobody died in the Egg arc! (besides the dhi'sks)

Aren't you surprised?

I know what you're thinking...ARIA YOU SHOULD HAVE KILLED THE CHARACTERS!

I know, right?

Well, that's okay. We have plenty of words left.

Now let's move on to the second arc of The Children's Revenge...

The Mira.

and it takes its sad creation for reality

*"If you are lucky enough to find a way of life you love,
you have to find a way to live it."*

- John Irving

Tommy blinked awake to bright lights in a medbay. There was a woman hovering above him, blocking out some of that nasty bright whiteness, her features soft but undiscernible to his impaired sight, "Niki?" he croaked out, attempting and failing to lift his hand to rub at his eyes. A panic rose in his chest, just barely starting, at the fact that his eyes weren't focusing, and that there was a pounding ache behind his eye area. Like a headache, but... lower.

"No, Tommy," the figure said quietly. "My name is Brooke."

"Brooke—?" he groaned, squinting at her. She had large shapes at the top of her head. Huh. He was pretty sure most people didn't have that.

"No, don't sit up," Brooke maintained, putting a gloved hand on his chest. He was sort of annoyed she managed to hold him down with little effort.

Tommy grimaced as he blinked further, Brooke's face finally coming into view, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Oh, yeah. She was the Chief Medical Officer aboard the *Mira*. She'd scanned Tommy, Drista, and Lani for infectious diseases after they'd been rescued from Icarus-45HB with Rae and Sykkuno.

Hang on.

"Aren't you—" he croaked and cut himself off with a cough. Brooke withdrew her hand and handed him a glass of water, holding it with both her hands as he sipped at it, gasping for air.

"Gently, now," Brooke said kindly, and wow, she had the exact opposite of Niki's bedside manner. "Don't choke. You have enough time to breathe."

Tommy coughed, swallowed the water, and gasped out, "aren't you the CMO of the *Mira*?"

"Yes, I am," Brooke said, placing his half-finished glass down on the bedside table.

Tommy glanced around. They weren't in the medbay like he'd originally thought, but in a recovery room that, unlike the *L'manburg*, a cruiser like the *Mira* had due to their tendencies to accept and persist on more dangerous wartime missions. The walls were a plain white, and the tiles cold and metallic looking, though there were some attempts to make it seem less crisp looking. A few vases with either fake or real flowers—he couldn't tell—littered the drawers lining the walls, as well as one painting of what seemed to be a black hole, dark against the expanse of the galaxies that stretched around it in a kaleidoscope of white, yellow, and orange. "This isn't the *L'manburg*."

No shit.

Brooke was nicer than that, though.

"No," Brooke said, getting off the bed and brushing the hair from her eyes with her wrist. "You are in Recovery Room 11B aboard the *Mira* cruiser. You have been here for twenty-eight hours."

"Why?" he asked, peering up at her. Brooke was silent for a moment, her mouth opening and closing it as she chose her answer carefully. A wave of panic ran through Tommy. "Is the *L'manburg* okay? Phil? Wilbur? Techno? Purpled? Drista—"

"Shh," Brooke said, and Tommy shut up. Brooke glanced at his heart monitor, frowning. "I'm going to need you to take in three deep breaths, okay? Your heart rate is a little high." Tommy glared at her, but complied. Brooke smiled when he finished. "Good, that's good. The crew members of the *L'manburg* will all make a full recovery. We are currently docked with them as we speak."

"Tubbo?" he managed.

Brooke's smile grew slightly pinched. "He took a bit more effort, but yes. He will live. As will your CMO, Lieutenant Nihachu, who was shot through the left side of her chest, and Officer Punz, who is currently recovering from his injuries."

Tommy leaned back against the pillows, a crushing sense of joy filling him. "We survived," he murmured wondrously, feeling tears prick the corners of her eyes. "We all survived."

Brooke frowned. "On to more serious matters, as it falls. Ensign Tommy, by your medical records, your hand should have been amputated a long time ago, and Officer Punz is still in a medically induced coma—"

"No, you don't get it!" he laughed, shifting his shoulders to free his hands so he could scrub freely at the tears falling down his face. "Every incident; every accident, every *place* I have ever been in—all of it has ended in death." Brooke's face paled, her hazel eyes shocked. "The *H.M.S Fran*, Pogtopia, the Children's Rebellion, the *U.S.S Midway*, the *Benecia*—all those horrific challenges, and all of them have ended in a loss of at least one life." He took in a deep breath, and let it out. "I have lost one of my friends or family in every single one of those moments. But I didn't lose one today." Understanding finally found its way into Brooke's eyes, her face softening sadly. Tommy threw back his head and laughed. "I didn't lose one today."

"Nor yesterday, nor the day before, nor any day that should come," a new voice said, and Tommy looked over to see Purpled standing in the doorway, a smirk on his face. He had a bruise on his upper cheek, and he was wearing a uniform of the *Mira* that was slightly too large for him at the shoulders, but other than that he looked perfectly fine. "Besides Chroma, hopefully," the Human added finally. "Of course."

"Of course," Tommy repeated, unable to keep the huge grin from his face.

"I'll leave Quartermaster Purpled to update you on the situation, then," Brooke said finally, looking slightly relieved. Probably because she was afraid Tommy had been about to have a mental breakdown, or something, which was frankly ridiculous. He would *never*.

He was sane mentally, physically, and uh... mentally. Yeah.

Purpled stepped aside, dipping his head as Brooke left. His magenta eyes glittered as the door shut behind the Chief Medical Officer.

"Situation?" Tommy asked finally. "What situation?"

"Yes," Purpled said, surveying the recovery room. "This place is so droll."

"It's an extension of the fucking medbay, not a carnival," Tommy said dryly. Purpled snorted. "Situation?" Tommy prompted again.

"Well," Purpled said finally, sitting down on the bed next to Tommy's legs. "with the *L'manburg*, I suppose she meant."

"What's wrong with the *L'manburg*?" Tommy frowned. "The bombs Wilbur—" he cut himself off with a forced cough, pretending he didn't see Wilbur's face with red eyes flashing in front of his vision. Purpled narrowed his eyes at him, clearly not falling for it. "—put down didn't go off."

"They would've, actually," Purpled said mildly. "Drista disabled them while she was in the engine room turning it back on."

Tommy blinked. "Oh." He frowned. "Wait, but *my* bombs didn't go off. The whole signal didn't happen. How did she know to enter it?"

Purpled sighed. "We heard an explosion, but it wasn't yours, though we thought it was. It was the *Mira* blowing a hole in the side of the *L'manburg*."

Tommy stared at him. "Say what now."

Purpled nodded, looking distracted. "There are these beings. Called the Starborne. Who apparently notified the *Mira* before the Egg even came into existence about the *L'manburg* being in trouble." He spat the last part bitterly.

"What?" Tommy blinked. "How? The Starborne? Aren't they fairytales?"

"I thought so too," Purpled said, lifting his chin and staring at Tommy stonily. "Until they snapped the Egg out of existence." Tommy raised an eyebrow at him. "Not literally."

"Good, 'cause I was about to make a Thanos joke."

"Please tell me Drista did *not* show you 'Avengers: Endgame'."

"She may have."

Purpled groaned. "Insufferable, the lot of you," he grumbled fondly.

"If the Starborne knew about the Egg beforehand," Tommy started slowly. "Why didn't they warn us directly? Why'd they let that all happen?" He couldn't help but feel annoyed, even if they'd been the reason the *Mira* had come.

Purpled shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "They disappeared before I could interrogate them."

Tommy frowned. "People can't just disappear off a spaceship. Two spaceships."

"People can't snap things from existence, either, but here we are, with fairytales becoming reality and reality becoming a harsh existence," Purpled sighed.

"What happened to Niki and Punz?" Tommy asked. "Shouldn't you be with your brother?"

"I was, for a bit," Purpled said. "They're on the *L'manburg*, though, and I'm avoiding that as much as possible." He opened his mouth as if he was going to say something more, but shut it after a moment.

"What?" Tommy asked, confused. "Why?"

"Because I want to punch them in the face," Purpled said nonchalantly.

"What?" Tommy shrieked. "Why?!"

"Is there an echo in here?" Purpled frowned, glancing around.

"*Purpled*," Tommy said through gritted teeth.

"I'm pissed off at them," Purpled said. Tommy gaped at them. "They have PTSD, Tommy. I can see it, even if they haven't come to terms with that. You probably do too."

"I do not," he said. "And you're pissed at them because they have PTSD?!"

Purpled rolled his eyes. "The Traumatized Teenagers, you idiot."

"Oh," Tommy blinked. "Well, I suppose that doesn't include me."

"Wilbur Soot," Purpled said instantly, and Tommy flinched. "See?" Tommy didn't answer, looking at his lap, ashamed. "All you can do is think about his hands on your throat. All Drista can do is think of how close she got to killing her brother before the crew of the *Mira* intervened."

"What?" Tommy whispered.

Purpled smiled sadly. "Funny, how in the end, it was a Human that managed to fight the Egg," he said, his voice tinged with bitterness. "Despite what the rest of the damn galaxy has been secretly whispering about when they think we can't hear."

"I never thought that," Tommy said.

"I know *you* didn't," Purpled conceded. "But a lot of people sure do."

"Dream fought the Egg's control?"

"And won," Purpled clarified. "Tried to get Drista to put him out of his misery and stab him."

"What a terrible thing to do," Tommy muttered.

"She had to disarm the bombs," Purpled explained. "Dream knew that. There wasn't any time for her to tie him up or knock him out because that parasite in his brain wasn't Human and would've done *anything* to survive. Maybe even break his own hand. I think she would've killed him, too." There was a bit of grudging respect in his voice.

"Why do you sound proud?" he choked out. "That's her *brother*."

"Family makes the right thing to do infinitely harder."

"The RIGHT THING TO DO?" Tommy shrieked. "You're talking about murder here!"

Purpled stared at him. "If you were mind-controlled, Tommy," he said easily. "and trying to kill me, and I had a gun, what would you want me to do?"

Tommy blinked at him, his mind flicking through several possibilities before grasping what Purpled was trying to explain. "You wouldn't do it," he said.

Purpled nodded. "No, you're right, I wouldn't. Never in a million years, and not for the universe itself." Okay, maybe that was a *bit* far, in Tommy's opinion. The universe was definitely worth more than him. Purpled tilted his head, and asked the question again. "What would you *want* me to do?"

Suddenly he found it hard to meet those eerie magenta eyes. Tommy swallowed. "Pull the trigger," he whispered.

"Exactly," Purpled said. "You would rather me kill you than live in a world where you had killed me." Tommy conceded his point with a defeated tip of his head. "That is inherently selfish, is it not? To force me to live in a world where I had killed you in self-defense?" He didn't bother waiting for an answer. "But that's how it goes. Survivors' guilt would be on any survivor's shoulders, no matter who lives. Dream made his choice, and Drista might've followed through, and that scares her. Him attacking her scares her." Purpled grimaced. "I think he might've said something to her too while he was mind-controlled because she cut off her hair earlier today."

"What?" Tommy demanded.

Purpled held up his fingers two inches below his shoulder. "Just to there. But still." Tommy stared at him. "It's bad, Tommy. Real bad. You and I have this unique ability to compartmentalize and hide our emotions—or, well I do—" Tommy scowled at him. "—but most of them have never been through a traumatic event. Fuck, *I've* never had my brothers actively try to kill me."

"Is Punz okay?" Tommy asked.

"Fine," Purpled said. "They think he'll wake up in a few weeks."

"You don't seem worried."

Purpled shrugged. "He'll wake up."

Tommy didn't bother asking what would happen if he didn't. "Why do you want to punch the crew so much?" he asked, attempting to get them back on track. "It's not their fault."

"Technoblade broke his bond with you," Purpled said, his eyes flashing.

Tommy gaped at him and reached for the bonds in his head. There were still two of them.

But one of them was unfamiliar—sort of. Tommy prodded at it experimentally and found Sykkuno on the other end, the Avian *nervous-worried-scared*, probably for his reaction. Tommy sent *okay-greeting-welcome* down their bond and vacated that part of his mind, shaking his head. "What happened?" he asked.

"Technoblade broke your bond," Purpled repeated. "Valkyrae managed to use her Avian-whatever to give it to Sykkuno, because it was like one-sided or something."

Tommy squinted at him. He'd have to attain the full story from either of the other two Avians. His flock, he supposed. Purpled didn't seem to care much for the details of that encounter, or maybe he just didn't know. There was a note of something in his voice that sounded like jealousy. "Is Techno okay?"

"He's fine," Purpled said coldly.

Tommy raised an eyebrow at him. "I meant the voices in his head."

"He can control them now."

Tommy snorted in disbelief, though he didn't think Purpled would outright lie to his face about something that he could figure out so easily.

"What do you remember?" Purpled asked him.

Tommy looked at him, and thought about it.

He'd been going into the cafeteria—no, he'd *been* in the cafeteria. Wilbur had been there with a bomb—no, a detonator. Right, Drista had disabled the bombs that he'd planted. Phil and Techno had been there too. Tommy winced at the memory of their angry red eyes and Techno's sword, which had had flecks of Tubbo's blood on it. There was a hand on his shoulder, and Tommy looked up to see Purpled staring at him. He closed his eyes again.

The Egg—it had been shouting.

Wilbur had been crying on the steps of Fleet school.

No, wait. That didn't make sense. Tommy blinked, and tried to recall why, exactly, he seemed to remember Wilbur setting on some steps on a cloudy day with tears on his face.

Ah.

Younger Wilbur had.

And Phil had raised his torch in a humid jungle, all alone on a planet for over five years, looking younger than he ever had.

And Technoblade, around sixteen, had cried out for a mother that would never land.

And—

—and Tommy had raised his hand for the members of the Children's Rebellion and had watched them all die again.

"Tommy!"

He'd been able to name them this time. He'd identified the person that had held him back and had recalled the jokes Foolish had made to Chroma about his own name.

He couldn't breathe.

"Tommy, stop holding your breath. You idiot."

Why couldn't he breathe?

Something struck him hard in his gut and he gasped out a breath of air at the pain, and then he wasn't in Pogtopia anymore, he was in the recovery room in the *Mira*. Tommy looked up at Purpled, whose hand was clenched in a fist. "Did you just *hit* me?" he choked out.

"Did you just have a panic attack?" Purpled replied, his eyes flashing with worry.

"The Egg showed me Pogtopia," he breathed out, grimacing as he rubbed his stomach.

Purpled stared at him. "Excuse me?"

Tommy squeezed his eyes shut as he wrapped his arms around his stomach, which didn't actually hurt anymore—Purpled hadn't really hit him that hard. Still, it felt nice. "It showed me the worst day of my life," he whispered. "I saw—I saw Phil's, and Techno's, and Wil's—" Somehow, it felt wrong to say what they were. It felt private. And Purpled didn't push, because he'd always known better than that. "And then came Pogtopia. And things were said that I hadn't remembered until I was forced to relive it. I identified people that had once just been voices in my memories."

"Are you sure you weren't hallucinating?" Purpled asked seriously.

"No!" he snapped. Purpled raised an eyebrow. Tommy sighed. "No," he said again, more firmly. "It... it made sense. The aftermath of the *H.M.S Fran*, the *Mira*... Phil's Hardcore missions... Wil's—" Tommy cut himself off before he spilled everything. "It's like a puzzle coming together. I saw some of their secrets, and suddenly everything made sense."

Purpled let out a small breath as he looked away from Tommy, those magenta eyes finally darting elsewhere. "What was it like?" he asked finally.

"There are things that I didn't remember that I do now," Tommy said again, closing his eyes and lowering his head. "that I saw." Purpled looked at him, a wordless question, and Tommy let out a quiet breath. "Foolish made a joke before the end."

"Of course he did," Purpled said with laughter in his throat that never left his mouth.

"And they ripped out Alyssa's claws," Tommy said, shivering as he remembered her bleeding nailbeds. Purpled's eyes flashed angrily, his jaw clenching. "so she couldn't fight."

"Of course they did," Purpled said neutrally, his mouth in a thin line.

"Seeing it again felt like a bad dream," Tommy said, squeezing his eyes shut. "The Egg was in my head."

"But it did not control you," Purpled said. "It did not."

Tommy sighed. "No," he said, hearing the exhaustion in his own voice. "It did not." He looked up and met Purpled's gaze. "What happens now? It's done, right? We won?"

"We won," Purpled said, jerking his head. "But what did it cost us?"

To that, Tommy had no answer.

you're not my parents

Chapter Notes

thanks for getting me to 3,271 followers on twitter :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"With the new day comes
new strength and new thoughts."*

- Eleanor Roosevelt

Purpled

Purpled splashed cold water on his face, gripping the edge of the porcelain sink so tightly he thought it might break. His fingers were white-knuckled from his grip, and the cold water shocked him as he blinked back exhaustion from his eyes.

The *Mira's* cafeteria replicator didn't have his coffee type programmed into it. That was fine. He'd soon fix that.

He blew out a breath and met his own eyes in the mirror.

Tommy was safe. Tommy was sleeping. He did *not* need to go check on him for the fifty-seventh time since his best friend been relocated to Recovery Room 11B.

He definitely needed to check on Tommy for the fifty-seventh time. What if he jumped out a window or something? Sure, they were in space, and sure, there wasn't a window in the recovery room, but it was Tommy. He would find a way.

It had been twenty-nine hours, thirty-seven minutes, and forty-two seconds since the *Mira* had come to rescue them. During that time, he had dropped by Tubbo's recovery room once to check in with Lani—both Shulkers would live; Lieutenant Brooke was adamant about that, though Tubbo would have a nasty scar—and then he'd shouted at Wilbur and accidentally-on-purpose gotten Toast to ban all the crew members of the *L'manburg* from the *Mira*.

He was sure they weren't happy about that, and probably would've stepped in had Purpled not heard Captain Philza taken Toast's side in refusing to allow the others to visit the kids. He knew that Lani probably wanted to see Nihachu, who was doing perfectly fine and even walking around, and Drista probably wanted to see Dream—but he was definitely going to be prepared to deck someone in the face when one of them inevitably had a panic attack, because no matter how sure any single *one* of them was that they would be okay, he knew that this reunion would not end well. That *any* reunion would end well.

For the first time in a while, he was uncertain of the near future.

Purpled met his own gaze in the mirror and started when he saw two figures standing behind him. He was reaching for the phaser Rae had given him before he caught site the purple hair and off-putting all-seeing eyes. He froze, turning slowly to face the two Starborne, who had somehow gotten into the room without the door opening. "How the hell did you get in here?" he snapped. "You vanished over a day ago! Nobody could find you!" He glanced at the bathroom stalls. "Don't tell me you were lurking in the stalls, because that's creepy."

Scott's lip twitched. Had Purpled just made a Starborne nearly laugh? He didn't know how to feel about that.

"Purpled," he mused. "We wanted to speak with you."

"You did, huh?" Purpled spat. "Aren't you People of the Universe? Why couldn't you have saved everyone in Pogtopia, huh? Did you sit by like it was a *movie* and watch all those children—"

Tommy would be proud that he had his priorities straight.

"Peace," Scott said, and Purpled was smart enough to snap his mouth shut, though he was still glaring at the two of them. "We do not control the Universe, Purpled. We listen to Its wishes."

"Oh, so Its wishes were for three thousand, two hundred, and seventy children to die on the Red Planet?" he snipped. "If your *Universe* is all-powerful, maybe it shouldn't have power."

"Do not—" Jimmy started.

Scott cut him off. "Do not expect him to understand, *gh'yashlyn*," he said gently, and Purpled frowned, because he could feel the electricity sparking at that Word. "He is only Human."

"The fuck is that supposed to mean?" Purpled snapped, bristling. Too long had the other Origins walked around him whispering about a lack of power and a lack of ability for him not to stand up to himself. Even against a pair of Starborne.

"You are mortal," Scott said, turning to look at him thoroughly, and Purpled raised his chin under the gaze of two fairytales come to life. "You will live, and you will die, and no matter what happens, the Universe will expand and grow."

"If you just came here to tell me my life was meaningless, you can leave," he said coldly, jerking his head towards the entrance of the bathroom. "There's the door. Or maybe you could snap yourselves out of existence. I could really care less."

Scott stared at him for a second. "We came here to talk to you about the Avian."

"Tommy?" he asked, raising his eyebrows. "If you're here to take him away, I will have to stop you." He'd probably fail, but the only reason someone would be able to take Tommy away from him would be over his dead body.

"You are so hasty," Jimmy said. Purpled resisted himself from flipping the damn being off.

"We believe him to be the child of the prophecy," Scott admitted. If Starborne could look uneasy or worried, he'd managed it.

Purpled gaped. "You—you're kidding. Prophecies? This is real life, not some damn fantasy world with magic and dragons." Scott looked at him calmly, and Purpled threw up his hands. "Okay, fine. Prophecy. Why do you want to talk to *me* about it?"

"Because Thomas Innes needs you, Purpled," Scott said. "The Universe needs you."

Purpled stared at him, floored. "So my life *isn't* meaningless."

"Nobody's life is, or ever was, meaningless," Scott sighed. "Mortality and meaningless go hand in hand, but they are not the same thing. Not by far."

"You let the children on Pogtopia die. Seems pretty meaningless to me. They died for *nothing*." Nothing but a page in the history books, anyway.

"We did nothing of that sort," Jimmy said. "If the Universe had allowed us to intervene, It would have sent us that way. We were busy Elsewhere." He seemed like he was going to say something else, but Scott did something that made him close his mouth.

Purpled threw up his hands. "Great. So Pogtopia *was* destined."

"It was, if you believe in destiny."

"Fuck your destiny," he spat, curling his hands into fists. "*Fuck it all*. I don't believe in fate. Tommy isn't your plaything. He's my *friend*. He's family. You cannot take him."

"We are Watchers," Scott said, tilting his head. "The *El'syvia*—the Egg—" he corrected, when Purpled pulled a confused face. "—was the creation of one of the Twisted. We Watch until we intervene. We decided to intervene."

"So you intervened for the first time because one of your evil twisted whatever-Starborne decided to fuck with us."

"Second time," Jimmy corrected. Purpled blinked at him. "We stopped the Avian you call Chroma on the beach and allowed you to rescue Thomas and Technoblade."

Purpled scowled, cursing himself for forgetting. "He didn't mention it until yesterday."

Scott shrugged. "What mortals tell of their experiences will always confuse us," he said. He tilted his head to the side, and Purpled thought he saw a nebula form and die in one of his eyes, but that was impossible. "A prophecy does not mean something is destined. It just means something *could be*."

Purpled swallowed. His throat felt dry. "And what does that prophecy entail?"

Scott and Jimmy exchanged a wordless glance before Jimmy stepped forward, opening his mouth.

There's a child with lungs full of stardust

The youngest-born child around

There's revenge singing songs of fire and death

And what was lost will always be found.

There are things born under a celestial moon

Things of lightning and sound

There's a child with a fresh breath of air

There's a boy with a burial mound.

There's a prophecy that speaks of a greater tomorrow

Of a death-planet and a voice to astound

There's a child who sings to those born of the stars

Their people gone evermore in the ground.

Purpled's mouth was open as Jimmy finished his chant, the words fading. "What the fuck," he said weakly.

"That's the translation in your language," Scott said. "It is a finicky thing to do; translate between *Star'lyia* and Standard. Words do not mean the same thing."

"What the fuck," he said again. "'The youngest born child around'? Lani's younger than Tommy!"

"The Avians are dying out," Scott said gently. Jimmy frowned but let his face fall back to quiet neutrality. "Have you met a younger Avian?"

"I've met four," he snapped. "Tommy, Chroma, Valkyrae, and Sykkuno."

Scott nodded. "There are more," he said simply. "But Tommy is the youngest one."

"You think he's some fucking savior because of his age?" Purpled asked, raising an eyebrow and not even bothering to ask where the other Avians were. Obviously, they weren't going to tell him; otherwise, they would've already. "What does that prophecy even mean?"

"I do not know," Scott said, looking troubled.

"I thought you knew everything," he said accusingly.

"We know much; as much as we can find, and as much as the Universe says we shall know," Scott explained, in an explanation that wasn't really an explanation at all. "The near-future." Oh, that would explain why they'd been able to direct the *Mira* to the *L'manburg*. "Not *everything*. That would be a lot. And also worrisome."

Purpled snorted.

Scott looked at him. "You don't have a last name, do you?"

"No," he snapped, wondering why the being had brought that up seemingly out of nowhere. "My brothers and I dropped it when our parents abandoned us. They don't deserve to be remembered because of what we do."

"Would you like me to Name you?"

Purpled stared at him. "Excuse you?"

"Would you like me to Name you?" Scott repeated.

"You're not my parents. You can't just... give me a name."

"Everyone carries a Name," Jimmy said. "They might become it. They might not. It is potential, nothing more." Purpled raised an eyebrow. "It is not destiny. Your Name does not shape you. It is like prophecies."

"What's Tommy's?" he found himself asking.

"We have not looked," Jimmy said, shrugging. "Your Names are written in your soul, and only you may let us look Beyond."

"Souls are real?"

"In a way," Jimmy said, and God, Purpled hated how Starborne were so weird and roundabout in their answering. "It is a private thing."

"Oh, so you stare into people's souls all the time and tell them their secret destiny name?" he snarked. Ponk would kill him for his lack of decorum.

Scott looked at him. "I have only given a Name twice in my existence," he said quietly. "And the last time another Starborne gave a Name was over ten thousand years ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

Purpled's jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"Would you like a Name?" Scott asked for the third time.

"No, hold up, you can't just drop *that* bomb and repeat yourself!" Purpled yelled. "There are people in other galaxies? And who was the first person you gave a Name to?" Neither Starborne replied to him, and Purpled blew out a breath, attempting to keep his short temper. "Of course you wouldn't answer. Ten thousand years? How old are you guys?"

"We have been Watchers since the birth of the First Universe," Scott said. "And have made many more since then."

"Okay, what number Universe is this?" Neither Starborne answered him again, and Purpled glared at him. "Helpful. So you guys are billions of years old, and you are willing to look into *my* soul and give me a name? Why?"

"Because in some cases, a Name can help you understand," Jimmy said, his tone slightly sing-song. "those that are lost will ever wander until they have been found."

"I am not *lost*," he snapped.

"Are you?" Scott asked, raising an eyebrow in a very Human gesture. Purpled crossed his arms. "Would you like a Name?"

"Fine," he said through gritted teeth. "Yes. Whatever."

"I do not think such a gift has ever been answered with 'whatever' in the history of any Universe," Jimmy murmured, and Purpled glared at him.

Scott stepped forward, and Purpled froze as the Starborne reached out a hand to touch his forehead.

His hand was warm. Like he was a real person, not some billion-year-old creature Watcher-thing.

Scott stepped back. Nothing happened. No magical shining light, no chanting words, no extra feeling in his chest like suddenly he knew the future. No visions. No spark of magical light.

It was... disappointing, to say the least.

Purpled blinked. "That's it?"

Both Starborne spoke at the same time in a chorus of voices that was sort of creepy and seemed to have some power behind it. "Your name is *Hilahnyien*," they said, and Purpled shivered as something settled into him, into his very bones. Something clicked that he hadn't even known was missing.

"Hilahnyien," he repeated, and was surprised when he said it perfectly the first time through. "What does it mean?"

"Devoted follower," Scott said, the corners of his eyes scrunching up slightly. "But 'follower', in *Star'lyia*, can often be mistaken for 'friend'."

Purpled gaped at him and spun towards the mirror, staring at his own eyes, like something could change in his soul if he stared deep enough. "My secret name is Devoted Friend?"

When he turned around, nobody was there.

Purpled checked the stalls but wasn't completely surprised to find nothing hiding there. He would've preferred if they'd just been creepily hiding in the bathroom, though, because that meant that the alternative was that they'd somehow teleported right under his nose.

Eventually, he gave up, throwing his hands in the air and muttering under his breath about the idiocy of billion-year-old beings—he couldn't even comprehend that they were possibly *that* old—and turned to look at himself in the mirror one last time.

"Purpled Hilahnyien, huh?" he murmured under his breath, and his own magenta eyes flickered something back. "Well, I'll keep your stupid name. Even if I don't believe in prophecies."

Several crew members of the *Mira* bid him a polite hello as he made his way through the ship, grabbing his datapad and checking in on Tommy for the fifty-seventh time.

He was still breathing.

Lieutenant Brooke kicked him out of the medbay area and its surrounding recovery rooms. Still, she was nicer about it than Lieutenant Nihachu would have been, only telling him that perhaps he should check in with the others, since Tubbo had woken up a few hours ago and had gone to wander around the *Mira* with his sister.

He had nothing better to do—besides maybe go scream at his own crew, but he was saving that for a rainy day—so he walked the halls of the *Mira* until he finally spotted a black-haired girl sitting on a bench in the datacenter reading something on her datapad, her legs curled close to her chest.

Purpled frowned. "Drista?" he asked.

The girl looked up. Her eyes were rimmed with tears. "Purpled," she returned, clearly trying to keep her calm.

"Did you cut and dye your hair?" he asked, gesturing at his own head. Drista shifted, her newly dark hair cut to just below her shoulder moving with her. She looked away, refusing to meet his gaze. "Is this because of what the Egg said to you?"

Drista's eyes widened. "How—what?"

"Clementine might've been off, but there were cameras," he said grimly. "I watched all of it. From every perspective."

"That's a severe invasion of privacy!" she burst out, clenching her fists.

He snorted. "Please, I've been scanning everyone's messages for years." Drista's eye twitched. She looked kind of like an actual spy with a short haircut and the same green eyes. "Would you have done it?"

"What?" she asked, confusion clouding her eyes.

"Killed your brother," Purpled said. "Would you have done it?"

"Of course not!" she snapped, but she didn't look so sure of her own answer.

"Pity," he said. "He was right, you know. It was the right thing to do."

Drista stood up; every step she took towards Purpled leveled in a fury. "How *dare* you," she seethed. "Your lack of empathy is *astounding*, you fucking *psychopath*. It's a wonder you're considered Human, because you have the emotional range of a fucking robot!"

Purpled blinked at her. "I have empathy," he explained coolly. "But Dream was right. If the crew of the *Mira* hadn't arrived, the best-case scenario involved killing him."

"How can you even say that?" Drista whispered, horrified. "He's my brother."

"And I hit mine in the head with a piece of metal akin to a baseball bat, going approximately the same speed as someone swinging a baseball bat would," he deadpanned. "Because it got me to the end, didn't it?"

Drista gaped at him. "Is that what happened to Punz?"

Purpled didn't deny it. "Yes. And I would do it again."

She shoved him in the chest. Hard. Purpled stepped backwards one step. "You could have *killed* him!"

"I didn't," he said. "But if that had allowed us to survive, then I would have. I wouldn't have enjoyed doing it. I wouldn't have wanted to do it. But I would've."

"You're a monster," she whispered.

Purpled flinched slightly, but played it off well. Drista didn't understand. She wouldn't, ever. Most people were too overcome with emotions to understand the right thing to do. "Look," he sighed. "If you tried to kill me right now, and I killed you in self-defense, would you blame me?"

"Of course not," Drista said instantly.

"And that's why I would not have hesitated to," he said. "I am no hero, Drista. I never pretended to be. I'm no martyr, either. I'm not going to refuse to kill you because you're my friend if you're actively trying to kill me." She gaped at him. "You, of all people, should understand that."

"I never learned my lessons well," she muttered. "You might've made a better spy."

He tilted his head. "No," he said with a small smile. "I was never good at the whole combat thing."

"A politician, then," Drista said with a laugh. "They're crooks, the lot of 'em."

"True," he agreed, reaching up and tugging at her hair. "So why black? Emo arc?"

Drista glared at him, tilting her head back so that the strand of hair he'd been holding was yanked out of his fingers. "Sykkuno lent me some of his."

He raised an eyebrow. "Sykkuno dyes his hair?"

"Yes, because Avians' hair lightens as they age—that's why Chroma has fucking gasoline-type hair," Drista replied, rolling her eyes. "Sykkuno didn't want pale hair."

Purpled frowned. "I thought that was just because Chroma was born a slimy bitch."

Drista snickered. "Perhaps you're right about that." She tilted her head. "It's why Wilbur didn't recognize Tommy. He had brown hair when he was like eleven."

"I forgot about that," Purpled muttered, internally kicking himself and filing that information away for a later date like he did for everything he learned about Tommy. "It looks..." he trailed off.

"Bad?"

"Different," he settled on. "Not necessarily in a bad way. You don't look like Dream."

She winced. "I know."

"Is that the point?"

Drista finally looked at him. "What's it to you?" she challenged.

He raised an eyebrow. "Just because I'm keen on doing the right thing doesn't mean I don't care," he said. "You're my friend. And you're clearly suffering from some type of post-

traumatic stress disorder." He didn't want to say *again* because she hadn't been able to be near a crackling fire for months after the events with Techno—and apparently the Starborne—on the beach when she'd been forced to shoot him after the Commander had shot her brother. "Or maybe it's a psychotic breakdown. I wouldn't know."

"Aren't you an expert on trauma?" she asked him.

Purpled laughed. It wasn't warm. "Maybe an expert on checking the boxes," he said, bringing up a hand and miming holding a clipboard and a pen. "So, how many of these can you check off?" He rubbed his chin and pretended to think about it, and Drista rolled her eyes, fighting off a smile. "Well, doctor, I think you can check off genocide, manipulation, starvation—"

"Okay, okay," Drista laughed, and Purpled put down his fake pen. "We'll be standing here all day."

"I'm not *Tommy*," he scoffed. "We'd be standing here for months with him." He rolled his eyes. "Not that he'd stand here for months. He'd deny every moment of every second if it would give him peace." Purpled smiled fondly. "Unfortunately, he's a stupid idiot."

"Isn't he your best friend?" Drista asked carefully.

"Yes," Purpled said. "Which is why if anyone else calls him a stupid idiot—not you guys, obviously, I meant people that aren't his friends—they'll never see the light of day again."

"Oh," Drista said, her voice slightly higher than usual. "Have I ever told you that you terrify me sometimes, Purpled?"

"No," he said, thinking about it. "But I appreciate the sentiment." He tilted his head. "Do you want to come to talk to the Captain about critical matters with me?"

Drista blanched. "Phil? Um, I think I need to get some reading done, actually—"

"I was talking about Toast," Purpled interrupted, not even broaching the subject that she'd actively tried to avoid meeting with *her* captain—their captain—despite saying she'd been fine minutes earlier. "I yelled at the crew of the *L'manburg* until they were barred from the *Mira*. Maybe it was a safety thing. For them."

"But they didn't do anything wrong!" Drista cried out.

"I didn't say that they did," he replied. "But five credits says that if you see Dream, you'll probably have a panic attack." Drista stiffened and opened her mouth, and Purpled cut across her. "I know. It sounds stupid. But that's just how this sort of thing works."

"I didn't even *kill* him," she argued.

"He tried to kill *you*," he said, and bit down on his tongue before he said *you tried to kill him in return*.

"That's not going to happen," she said. "He's my brother. I will not be scared or terrified by someone I've known my own life."

Purpled opened his mouth, but something made him stay silent that extra second just to think. Drista was stubborn, exorbitantly so, just like him—and oh, what a Human trait that was—and nothing he was going to say would change her mind. He didn't think he'd do to her what he'd do to Tommy, though—which would be dragging her down the corridor and taking a transport to the *L'manburg* just to prove him right—because he doubted she'd appreciate that. So he shut his mouth, because she'd learn eventually. "Do you still want to come with me to see Toast?" he asked tiredly.

Drista fell into line beside him as he moved to go, just as he knew she would. "What for?"

Purpled let her words fall to silence as they traversed the hallways of the *Mira*, deciding on how to say this as carefully as possible without doing the most damage. "Tubbo and Lani are requesting a... leave of absence from duty."

Drista stopped dead in her tracks. Purpled did not. Drista had to jog to catch up, her green eyes wide.

"Close your mouth, or you'll catch space flies," he told her.

Drista sputtered. "Leave of absence? For how long?"

"Until further notice," he shrugged. "That means permanent."

"How do you know?"

"I get an alert when the words 'Dear Captain Philza, I would like to request a leave of absence' are used in a message. In that exact order." Drista gaped at him. Purpled smirked.

"You knew," she said accusingly.

He held up a hand. "Ah. I *suspected*. It made sense due to the circumstances."

"It—!" she cut herself off furiously. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

He sighed. "Lani shot Niki—and committed a felony, but that's beside the point, because Lieutenant Nihachu dropped those charges immediately—and clearly has a ton of guilt behind it that will affect her apprenticeship with Niki. Tubbo got stabbed by Technoblade, and so both of them think that they're doing the other one a favor by facing their fears and..." he trailed off, frowning. "Retiring, perhaps, is the wrong word, but whatever—so they're discussing with Captain Toast right now instead of talking to Philza. The message wasn't actually sent, by the way. It's still a saved draft on Lani's datapad." He scowled. "Tubbo has too many firewalls."

Drista stared at him. "Maybe you should've gone into politics," she announced.

Purpled scoffed. "Hell no. I'd destroy everyone within seconds, especially if I recruited Tubbo to hack their messages and find out how many of them are cheating on their partners. Not the mention their money laundering. It'd be boring."

"Boring," she parroted. "to overthrow what's likely a good two-thirds of the Senate."

"Boring," he repeated. "Let's go hijack this meeting."

"What's your plan?" she fired back.

"Convince them not to resign, obviously," he said with a scowl, dipping his head at Peter, one of the security officers—specifically the one whom he'd stolen a phaser from and slammed against the wall when the Feline had been returning from helping Lani in the medbay. Peter frowned at him, taking a wide berth around them, and Purpled noticed with a smirk that he kept a hand on his phaser this time. Toast had just laughed when he'd found out and told Peter that maybe he should go back to training if he'd let an eighteen-year-old Quartermaster take him down and steal his weapon.

There had been no mention of him being Human as a reason why Peter should've been able to defeat him. Purpled appreciated that. Not to mention it had been Toast who had eventually held him back in the cafeteria before finally releasing him.

"Oh," Drista said finally, with a blink. "I thought you'd be a bit less subtle than that."

Purpled eyed her. "Well, I'm going to convince them that transferring to the *Mira* would be a better option."

"What?" she shrieked, making a passing engineer—Yvonne, he thought her name was—jump.

Purpled unhooked his datapad from its holster and swiped it open, tapping in the twenty-three lettered—well, there were numbers and symbols as well—passcode with a deft hand.

Drista raised an eyebrow, peering at the keypad. "That's not Standard," she noted, like the genius she was.

"No, it's a coded language I made up and keyed into my datapad with the help of a technician," he replied.

"What happened to the technician?"

"I wiped his memory," Purpled said. Drista gave him an *I-can't-tell-if-you're-kidding* look, but he didn't reply to her unasked question. "Look, see?" Drista looked at it, but she looked ready to jump back in case it blew up. "I pulled our transcripts already."

"We can't serve aboard the *Mira*," Drista pointed out. "Tommy, Lani, and I haven't finished school yet."

Purpled scrolled through the documents. "What are you talking about? Your graduating papers are right there. Signed by an admiral and everything."

Drista did a double-take. "What the—huh? That's dated seven hours ago!"

"Eh, you guys are smart enough," Purpled said. "It's a field promotion."

"You can't do that," she objected.

"I'm the Quartermaster," he said. "I have every right to contact an admiral and make a twenty-six paged message as to why I believe that you three should receive field promotions

due to your outstanding bravery in the face of certain death."

Drista gaped at him.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I already have my list of reasons why Toast should accept *five* transfers from the *L'manburg*." He winked. "You think we'd leave those two troublemakers alone? Nah."

Chapter End Notes

"Hilahnyien" is pronounced "Hih-lani-en"

purpled commits another felony (really, who is surprised?)

Chapter Notes

weekly updates are back on Fridays at 9:30am EST!

art!

[Here](#) is some amazing art created by [Dips](#) of the children of Pogtopia!

[Here](#) is a painting by [EnderGuppy](#) of the sign of the Children's Rebellion!

[Here](#) is some art by [whyismartha](#) of the graves of Alyssa, Foolish, and Grian :(

[Here](#) is a piece by [neon](#) of Alyssa holding up the sign of the Children's Rebellion

"Love means not ever

having to say that you

are sorry."

- Erich Segal

Tommy was surprised when he received a summons from Captain Toast calling him to his quarters. He was doubly surprised when he walked his first steps in nearly a day and a half, and Purpled wasn't there to breathe down his neck and judge him with every first, second, and third shaky step he took.

Brooke didn't like it, of course. But unlike Niki, she didn't put her foot down and command the Captain to let her patient rest, and instead, she helped him walk to the Captain's office, though there was a sour look that came about her face every time that Tommy nearly fell flat on his face.

A few times, Tommy saw members of the *Mira's* crew in the corridors giving him small smiles as he walked—really, it was more of a hobble—past.

He did not smile back. It was not meant to be mean or rude, though if Purpled had been in his place, it certainly would have been; it was because Tommy was in the middle of a severe problem.

He was afraid.

Toast's orders hadn't had any details on them. Just: *1800, Captain's Office. Be there.*

Tommy was actually a minute late because he'd had to take a rest on account of his chest hurting so much that Brooke had almost rushed off to get him an emergency air tank, but that would've been *really* embarrassing, so he waved her off and tried his best to breathe through lungs that didn't want to draw air.

(And as he tried to live through a body that was half-tempted to die.)

He was pretty sure that Purpled would murder him if he died, though, or at least haunt his existence and give him glares for all eternity, and Tommy wasn't really keen to deal with that, so he was just going to stay alive for now.

He opened the door to the office, waving Brooke away as she hovered anxiously a few feet behind him, and blinked in surprise when he saw four others sitting around Toast's chair—specifically his friends; Purpled, Drista, Tubbo, and Lani.

Drista had short, dark hair. He tried to will himself not to react, but Drista read through his terrible act of suppressing his surprise and snorted.

"You're not supposed to be walking," Purpled said instantly, distracting him from the fact that the previously-blonde-haired-girl had gone through some type of mental breakdown that Tommy had read about somewhere. Actually, he was pretty sure Sniff had mentioned it one time.

Tommy snorted as he sat down in the center chair of the five—five, not six, as it should have been, and would be no more—and boy, *that* fucking hurt—wincing slightly and praying that Purpled hadn't noticed. By the narrowing of the magenta-eyed boy's eyes, he'd definitely noticed and definitely disapproved. "Lieutenant Brooke said I could."

"Did she?" Purpled wondered. "Or did she say that because Captain Toast sent you a summons?" Tommy scowled at him, and Purpled raised an unimpressed brow.

Toast cleared his throat. "Yes, well, I—" he glanced at Purpled, who kept a deadpan expression. "—summoned you here due to a series of conversations—"

"It's fine; you can say arguments," Tubbo said crossly, glaring at Drista, who stuck her tongue out at him childishly. Tommy frowned, glancing between the two groups—Drista and Purpled on his left and Tubbo and Lani on his right—wondering what had made the palpable tension unmistakable in the room.

"A *series of conversations*," Toast continued, his tone thin enough that Tubbo didn't interrupt him again. "That involves you five." He took a breath, and added, "And your futures."

"Are we getting arrested?" Tommy asked, only half-joking, and Lani winced so openly that he was surprised she didn't hurt her neck. Oh, right. She'd committed a war crime...right?

"No," Toast said calmly. "You are not getting arrested." He took a moment to look each of them in the eyes. "Ensign Drista. Quartermaster Purpled. Ensign Thomas. Lieutenant Tubbo. Ensign Lani. You all have a crucial decision to make."

The other four nodded like they knew something.

Tommy looked between them. "I feel left out," he coughed.

"Lani and Tubbo want to resign," Drista burst out, crossing her arms, a sullen expression making its way to sit on her face. Tommy gaped at her and then swung his head to look at the two Underscores in the room, both of whom refused to meet his gaze.

"It's a leave of absence," Lani shot back, her eyes firmly on her feet. "We're not *resigning* from the Galactic Rebellion."

Purpled snorted, his voice full of disdain. "The way I see it, it might as well be permanent. You'll be too afraid to come back." His lip curled slightly. "You have to get back on the horse or you'll never ride again."

"I am not *afraid*," Tubbo snapped, his brown eyes flashing. "And the *L'manburg* isn't a fuckin' horse."

"Please," Toast cut in, sounding tired. "Let's not argue about this further. I invited Ensign Thomas here so he could have his own input."

He swallowed. "You're asking me if *I* want to resign?"

Toast shook his head. "I'm merely telling you your options."

"Which are what?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"You can, if you so choose, follow Lieutenant Tubbo and Ensign Lani on their path down a leave of absence, or you can follow Quartermaster Purpled and Ensign Drista on their transfer from the *L'manburg*—"

"*What?*" he yelped, looking at his friends wide-eyed. "You're requesting a transfer?"

"No," Purpled said. "We *are* transferring."

There was definitely a *you are too* buried in there.

Drista coughed quietly, catching his attention from the staring contest with his best friend. "I can't go back, Tommy," she said, her brilliant green eyes shining with sadness. "I can't—not now. Surely you must understand."

Tommy opened his mouth to argue with her, but paused when a familiar pair of red eyes flashed across his vision. His hand moved on its own volition towards his throat, where hand-shaped bruises would've lain if Lani hadn't given him a salve what seemed like weeks ago, but in reality was less than sixty-four hours. "I get it," he said quietly. "Not wanting to go back." Drista lowered her gaze, looking ashamed, as he added, "but aren't they our family?"

"That doesn't mean we don't need a break," Lani said, clearly agreeing with Drista on this subject. "A transfer, though..." she shook her head, trailing off. "I don't know if that would make things better."

"To where?" he asked.

"To us," Captain Toast said, and Tommy blinked at him in surprise, his heart rising into his throat. Toast grinned slightly. "I've taken the liberty of printing out the official forms." He reached under his desk and pulled out a file. Tommy raised his eyebrows in surprise at the expensive-looking paper that the Human placed on the desk, watching as he flipped it open and deftly spread out five sheets of identical pieces of thick white stationery that was covered in dozens of lines and words about as small as a ten-point font. Toast met Tommy's eyes. "If you would like, of course."

"I..." he started, his voice catching thickly in his throat. "Why?"

Nobody called his question stupid. He was pretty surprised by that fact, but when he looked over at Purpled, the Human had pulled one of the five sheets towards him and was scanning

it, his mouth moving over the words silently.

Toast clasped his hands together, a breath of air escaping his mouth as he appeared to choose his words carefully. "Tommy Innes," he started carefully. "It is not every day that a crew of a starship can turn against one another and present no casualties at the end of the day."

It was then that Purpled looked up, coughing slightly, his gaze darting between Toast and Tommy, and Tommy didn't understand the look that lay behind his magenta eyes—but then again, he didn't understand half the things that Purpled did, and he didn't suppose he ever really would.

But Toast's words rang some bell in his head. Understanding flashed through Tommy, as quick as a flash flood, and he straightened his spine. "Oh," he said, and Toast inclined his head slightly, his dark eyes shining with old pain and sorrow. Tommy glanced around the Captain's office of the *Mira*, and wondered what sort of memories it brought around.

There was a picture hanging on the wall, roughly half a foot by a quarter of a foot and framed in gold. He could not make out the people in it, and he did not stop to wonder when it was dated. Toast would not be the only one with the reminders of those who no longer breathed hanging in his personal quarters. He would be a hypocrite to judge the captain for that.

"It's been a while since then," Toast spoke up, apparently having guessed his train of thought—or perhaps seen his wandering eyes. "But when I disbanded the original crew of the *Mira*, it was out of the very same pain you five now feel at this moment. The very same fear."

"I'm not *afraid*," Drista snapped, sounding very much like how Tubbo had said it only minutes prior, her chin held high and her green eyes flashing with fortified anger. "He's my family."

Toast gave her a deadpan expression, holding her gaze until she sat back heavily in her chair, crossing her arms, her jaw set irritably. "I lost more than..." he coughed slightly, and rolled his shoulders to compose himself. Purpled finally raised his eyes from the document to listen in to the conversation, his head tilted slightly. "I lost more than my position that day, when I gave away my ship, even if was also promoted to Vice Admiral. More than my missions. I lost my crew, too."

"But they weren't *dead*," Tubbo pointed out.

"No," Toast agreed. "They weren't. But some of them might as well have been." He laughed wryly, shaking his head. "When I resigned, and the *Mira* was disbanded, some of my crewmates walked off and never looked back until the Rear Admiral contacted them to ask if they wanted to be reinstated into the crew of the *Mira* once more." His expression turned grim. "Seven of them still declined. I hadn't seen more than four of them in the three years that followed up until the *Mira* was reinstated. I hadn't seen those seven that declined in the years that followed, and I doubt I will ever see some of them ever again." He shrugged, trying to bring around an air of nonchalance, but Tommy, who had carried some of the same weight on his shoulders for many years, noticed it in the slightly hunch of his back. "Some burdens don't ever go away."

"But..." Lani started, her eyebrows furrowing in confusion. "Did you—do you regret it? Resigning, I mean?"

"Every day," Toast said, his mouth twisting wryly—with ruefulness, Tommy thought. "I was a coward, in that sense." Purpled's expression flashed with shock, like he hadn't expected a Human to have a Human emotion. Then again, Purpled hated emotions, so Tommy wasn't really surprised. Toast's right hand clenched into a fist, his eyes clouding over slightly as he lost himself in old memories. "I *knew* those shapeshifting aliens were gone—were executed; in fact, I saw to it *personally*—"

Tommy wondered just how personal it had been. If Toast had held the gun; or if he had watched the life vanish beneath the eyes of his crewmates, his friends—because the aliens had worn the faces of those he'd trusted, and had killed with those very same faces. He wondered if he'd be able to order the same thing, knowing that he was either killing people he loved, or understanding with finality that the friends the aliens had replaced had been dead for far longer.

He wondered if the people the aliens had murdered had thought their friends had been killing them in their very last breaths.

Toast was still talking. "And yet I was so afraid that every person I knew would stab me in the back every time I turned around that I didn't want to be around people that cared for me

anymore. If I didn't trust anyone, then they wouldn't be able to kill me, see?" he explained.

"That makes sense," Purpled said instantly, and honestly. Tommy rolled his eyes.

"No," Toast said seriously. "I saw ghosts and demons around every corner, and never trusted someone for a long, long time, even though all the warning signs were gone and those two aliens were killed. I still don't trust easily. I am paranoid. I was paranoid. I was also *wrong*."

"Would you do it again?" Tommy found himself asking, his heart in his throat. "Would you make the same choices, knowing the outcome?"

Toast looked at him, contemplation in his expression. "If I knew that the future would end up to where we were now? Yes." Tommy let out a small noise of surprise, and Drista echoed his after a moment. Tubbo's eyes were very, very wide. "I couldn't execute my First Officer or my Chief Security Officer—I banished them to a planet instead. I was wrong, then, too. After the aliens murdered a few more of my crewmates—and we knew that we had banished them for nothing but suspicion and speculation—there was little room for remorse, regret, *and* survival in our hearts. The second time, I executed the perpetrators, and thankfully I was right. But Rae and Sykkuno I'd banished, and I never knew where until the signal came through that fateful day all those months ago. You three—" he nodded at Lani, Tommy, and Drista. "—managed to get lucky enough to fall planet-side of the same ball of dust I'd put them on over three years ago. If they hadn't been there, you'd probably be dead."

"So..." Purpled said, frowning. "You'd make the same choices again? Even knowing the future?" A direct repeat of Tommy's question, but lined with more disdain.

Toast shrugged. "Time travel doesn't exist, Quartermaster," he said gently. "I don't let myself dwell on destiny and possibilities when we exist in the present. I'm not *happy* about what happened—far from that—and I am definitely not happy that I resigned from my captaincy aboard the *Mira* and fled like a cowed dog with his tail in between his legs." Tommy snorted at the metaphor. "But I am glad that you three ended up where Rae and Sykkuno did, so you could save them, and them, you. And I am also glad that we were there to rescue the *L'manburg* a few days ago. Many things would be different if I'd made different choices." He met Tommy's gaze. "Many things would be different if we'd all made different choices."

Tommy flinched slightly, and Purpled reached out, squeezing his hand beneath the desk.

"We cannot change the past," Toast continued firmly. "Nor can we forget it. But we can *learn*, and I know that if you resign from your position aboard the *L'manburg* and choose to return to Terra, or whatever planet you choose, you will come to regret it one day. Space is a scary place. It is why Humans chose to try to conquer the stars in the first place." He turned to Drista, his mouth crooking up into a bit of a smirk. "Because they refused to be afraid."

"Yes, well, we tend to be a bit stubborn like that," Drista sniffed.

"This is a three-month contract," Purpled pointed out, changing the subject, and tapping the paper with his pointer finger. Tommy wondered, for a second, how he'd read the hundreds of words of fine print that was probably Galactic Rebellion specifications—and then realized, oh right, it was Purpled, and quit wondering how.

One never wondered how when it came to Purpled.

Toast shrugged. "I told you. It's not a permanent position. The problem therein lies in the reality that you do not need time away from the stars, or from space travel—but from your crew." He tilted his head. "Your family. And it is not your fault, or theirs, but the truth hurts, and there it is in front of you." Lani shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable. "Do not ruin your love for the Galactic Rebellion by trying to force yourself down a path that cannot fit you. Not yet." Toast lowered his voice slightly. "Do not run from the stars. You would greatly benefit being among them."

"But..." Drista started, her voice quiet and lacking any of the previous anger she'd held there. "He's my *brother*. I should be there for them."

Toast was already shaking his head. "They need to heal too," he said gently. "You forget that they remember what they did to you. This isn't something that you can hypospray away—" he glanced at Lani. "—or even sew up, old fashioned, with a needle and a thread."

"It's not quite—" the girl started, and then cut herself off. "Never mind."

"Sometimes *time* is the best healer," Toast said. "Your crew, your family regrets it, and hates themselves for what they did. You know they do." Tommy made a loud noise of indignation, and Toast held up a hand. "You don't blame them." His eyes flicked to Purpled. "Or you shouldn't, anyway."

"I do," Purpled muttered, and Tommy kicked him underneath the table. Hard.

Toast ignored Purpled, which was probably for the best. "They blame themselves. It hurts for them to see you, and for you to see them. I am not asking you to walk away *forever*, nor for even half a year. I am not asking you to forget. I am asking for you to let them *accept* what happened, and what they did—and I am asking you to take *time* to walk your own paths of understanding and acceptance. Time heals nothing unless you move along with it."

Lani stared down at the paper. "Does this mean I'll have to bring this to—to Lieutenant Nihachu?" she asked, her voice breaking.

She hadn't even said *Niki*, and that was how Tommy came to understand that Toast was right.

"No," Tubbo said, before the captain could speak up. "I'm eighteen. Technically speaking, I gained your legal guardianship by transfer. I just never submitted the paperwork because it didn't matter." He grimaced. "I'll just... submit it after this meeting, then."

"I'll sign it," Toast said kindly. "I still have my Admiralty permissions. They didn't take away that as well. We had an agreement." He had a thin smile, which probably meant that he'd bullied them into agreeing.

"So..." Tommy started, licking his lips. "We're doing this, then?"

There was a bit of silence.

"I am," Lani said firmly, her gaze darting between her brother and Drista. "Admiral Toast—uh, I mean Captain Toast—is right. I don't want to stop my medical internship. Thingy." She

was picking at a bit of skin at the base of her nails, Tommy noted. "I don't want to go back planet-side, either."

"I don't think the ground was meant for any of us," Tommy pointed out lightly.

"Well, I'll accept it too, then," Tubbo nodded. "Obviously I wouldn't be the Chief Operations Officer—what position would I get?"

Toast smiled. "I've negotiated a position under Tina for you," he said. "That's my Chief Operations Officer," he clarified, when Tubbo tilted his head at the unfamiliar—to him, at least—name. "I hope you don't mind that."

"Of course not," Tubbo said eloquently. "Besides, the *Mira* isn't an explorer-class ship, like the *L'manburg*. It's a cruiser, and a war-class ship at that. It's much larger." He shuddered. "That would be a lot of work. Paperwork. Eeugh."

"I love paperwork," Purpled said.

Tommy glared at him. "No you don't, you control freak. You just like information."

Purpled shrugged, not seeming to care. "Guilty as charged."

Toast seemed to hold back a laugh. "Ensign Drista, you would be a Tactical Officer."

She frowned. "Not a Junior Tactical Officer?"

Toast shook his head. "We are not an explorer-class," he explained. "Just as Lieutenant—ah, *Ensign* Tubbo—said. We don't do junior officers. There is no *in-training* here. This ship is meant for fighting."

She perked up. "So technically I'm getting promoted."

"You're going to be doing the same thing you did on the *L'manburg*," Purpled pointed out. "Except, you know, not going to school, because of your field promotions."

Tommy stared at him. "Field what now."

Toast cleared his throat. "You three were given field promotions due to your outstanding performance in the face of certain death," he told Tommy, and gesturing at Drista and Lani. "Your Quartermaster was kind enough to file the claim, and it was...accepted by the greater majority of the active Admiralty."

Purpled had definitely bullied them.

Tommy sat up straight in his seat. "But—" he started. "I haven't finished Advanced Subspace Geometry!"

"I don't think you'll need that to be a helmsman," Toast said, sounding amused. Tommy gaped at him. "Yes, I thought that since you needed a mentor who wasn't Dream—and was *actually* a full-time helmsman—you could get your permit with Hafu." His eyes twinkled. "Maybe even obtain your license."

"*Really?*" he gasped, and immediately hated his own excitement that escaped him. Purpled snorted. Tommy cleared his throat and sat up straighter, laying his hands on his lap and clenching them into fists—what fingers he could, anyway. "I mean, um, I'll have to think on it."

"No, you won't," Purpled told him, sliding one of the thick pieces of stationery across the table. "I took the liberty of putting your signature on it."

Toast closed his eyes and leaned his head forward until his forehead was touching his clasped fists. "I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that."

Tommy glared at him weakly, glancing down at the piece of paper, where, sure enough, his own signature was signed in red pen. He didn't even know where Purpled had *gotten* a red pen, unless he'd pulled it out of his sleeve or something. Tommy scanned through the rest of the blank spaces—date of birth, species, origin planet, blah blah blah. Normal stuff.

MEMBER OF CREW

thru LHO

ACTIVE CAPTAIN:

**GALACTIC REBELLION
CONFIRMATION MEMBER:**

Toast. D Rivera


Signature

Toast shook his head. "Unfortunately not," he said, an understanding grimace twisting across his lips. "It must be your captain."

Tommy sighed. "Well, I guess we're doing this, then," he said glumly. "Getting a transfer."

Drista tossed her dark-haired head. Tommy was going to have to get used to it being shoulder level, not to mention the fact that it was now as dark as Rae's instead of the pale blonde. "At least *you're* eighteen. I have to see Dream *and* Philza." Tommy glanced at Drista's form, which was identical to Lani's but different from his due to him being a legal adult now under Galactic Rebellion law. Theirs had an extra signature.

Tommy looked at her. "I can—uh, come with you if you wish," he said carefully. Purpled raised an eyebrow at his stutter, but fortunately, nobody directly called him out on it.

"I'd appreciate it," Drista said gratefully, dipping her chin jerkily.

"We *all* need to go see the captain," Tubbo pointed out crossly.

Toast cleared his throat. "If Ensign Tommy goes with Ensign Drista to see her brother for the guardianship signature, then I can arrange a meeting in three hours' time with Captain Philza," he said. "You wouldn't have to enter the *L'manburg*."

Tommy didn't like the fact that Tubbo and Lani looked relieved—and that there might've been solace in *his* chest about that if he hadn't volunteered to go with Drista. Purpled looked slightly cross about it, but that was probably for the better, because Tommy had a slight inkling that Purpled might've hit anyone that crossed their paths. Or that he might've drawn his phaser that someone had foolishly allowed him to strap to his leg. Drista just appeared worried.

"Alright," Toast said, after a moment of silence. "Once Drista and Lani return, we can reconvene and call Captain Philza over."

"Can't we just call Dream over here too?" Drista whined.

"He's currently unable to leave the medbay, so no," Toast told her.

Drista shoved herself back from the table so quickly that Tommy had to reach out and catch her chair before it fell. Or he tried to. He'd forgotten his fingers didn't quite work properly, and so it slipped through his hand anyway and went crashing onto the floor. Purpled gave him a judgmental side-eye, and Tommy flushed, his cheeks and ears burning.

"He's fucking *what*?" Drista shouted, completely ruining Tommy's embarrassment as he jumped at her loud voice, reaching for a knife that wasn't there, and hadn't been there, for quite a while, ever since he had dropped Purpled's birthday present to him after Wilbur had tried to kill him for the first time. "Nobody told me that!"

"You haven't been in contact with your crew," Toast pointed out, his voice calm, and Drista paused in what Tommy was sure would've been quite an epic tirade. "And you've been avoiding us. The only reason you're *in* this room is because Quartermaster—I apologize," he said, tilting his head as Purpled slid the bit of paperwork across the table to him, completed. "Ensign Purpled."

This was the beginning of an end, then.

Purpled grimaced. "I haven't been called that in a long while," he said, though there was no malice in his tone.

Toast inclined his head in Purpled's direction. "Regardless," he said. "The only reason you are in this room currently, Ensign Drista, is due to Ensign Purpled's debatable intervention in my resignation meeting with the Underscores that brought you both into my office, and finally brought Ensign Thomas in as well."

Yeah, that sounded like Purpled. 'Debatable intervention' was probably lawyer-speak for *breaking in*. That definitely also sounded like something Purpled will do.

"Your brother is fine, Drista," Toast told the blonde—the black-haired girl. Tommy was seriously going to have to keep remembering that. He was also definitely going to ask why Drista had entered an emo arc, though he could probably guess as to why. "Your Chief Medical Officer is very... protective."

"Yes, Nik—Lieutenant Nihachu is like that," Lani said, and there was not a soul in the room—not a bug; not a mote of dust, in fact—that did not hear the stutter and the formality behind her tone as she noted her mentor. Her old mentor? Tommy wasn't so sure. He also definitely wasn't going to ask.

"Lieutenant Dream is also the type to sneak aboard a ship, regardless of the negative fallout," Purpled noted, sounding slightly bored. "I'd bet real money that he would've tried to do it, and not gave a shit about the consequences."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "What about counterfeit money?"

Purpled turned to face him fully. "Excuse me?"

Tommy shrugged. "You mentioned real money, so that leads on to the fact that counterfeit money could be used as well."

"*All* the fake money, then," Purpled deadpanned, not appearing amused, though Drista cracked a small grin.

Toast cleared his throat. Tommy noted that maybe next time he should bring in a Toast-clears-throat counter, because he seemed to do that a lot. Or maybe that was just because the five of them could get extremely distracted extremely quickly. "Ensigns Drista and Tommy, you are free to leave to the *L'manburg*," he said. "Please go see Lieutenant Fi'hye'vep. He's standing in for Yvonne, our normal transport engineer."

Tommy blinked at him. "Who?" he asked.

Drista leaned over. "That's Elytrian," she whispered, so loudly that the entire room heard it. Lani snorted loudly.

Tommy elbowed her. Hard. In the chest. She shrieked and scowled at him, rubbing the spot where he'd hit. Tommy did not feel one ounce of pity. Not at all. "I *know* that," he told her. "I

was very good friends with one." Drista paled rapidly, and Tommy did not let himself feel satisfaction in making her embarrassed. He was not Purpled, after all. He took no pride in his friends' pain. Tommy turned back towards Toast, who had a very good poker face. Either that, or he didn't care, but Tommy was willing to bet with all the counterfeit money that it was the former. "I've never heard of him."

"You can also call him εup," Toast suggested, pronouncing it like *five-up*. "That's the Standard shorthand."

"Five-up?" Lani repeated.

"εup," Toast corrected.

"That's the same thing," Lani complained.

"No, it's not," Purpled pointed out. "It twists at the beginning."

Toast inclined his head in the quartermaster—in the *former* quartermaster's direction. "Correct... Ensign." Purpled made a slight face. "As I was saying, Ensigns Tommy and Drista, you are free to go meet Lieutenant Fi'hye'vep in the transport room. Commander Sykkuno and Lieutenant Valkyrae will guide you there. I believe they are waiting just outside."

Tommy cocked his head, opening up his mind to the bonds, and noted that they were indeed bright, indicating the closeness of his...his flock. He swallowed. Sykkuno was cool, and all, but he was not Techno—his brother, in all but blood—and the other Avian's bond shone a little differently.

"I don't think I have ever heard someone call Rae and Sykkuno by their designations," Purpled noted, his tone a tinged amused.

"Yes, well, Sykkuno has never enjoyed Galactic Rebellion propriety," Toast said, smiling slightly. "Even for being the commander of a constitution-class cruiser as well-respected as the *Mira*, he manages to always look intrinsically awkward at mandatory conferences. And Rae just finds it all amusing."

"Yet he *is* the commander," Purpled said, a hint of a question coloring his voice.

Toast nodded, not looking offended by the question. "And I would have no other," he said firmly. "In fact, I have never *had* another. That position was empty for the test flights and Corpse was not promoted after the fallout of the *Mira* the first time around."

Tommy stood up to go before Toast got that sad look on his face again. "Captain," he said, executing a near-perfect salute that made Purpled snort under his breath and Tubbo huff out a tiny bit of a laugh. Drista followed him after a moment, though her movements were perfect and far cleaner than he could ever hope his would be.

Tommy turned to go, Drista at his heels.

"Not you three," Toast said, and Tommy paused, looking over his shoulder at Purpled, who was halfway out of his seat, and Tubbo, who had his hands on the arms of his chair like he'd been about to get up too. "I am hardly *stupid*, Purpled."

Purpled huffed slightly. "I know that."

Tommy's eyes jerked up in surprise. That was about as good of a compliment that someone that wasn't Tommy was going to get. Toast seemed mildly surprised by the lack of derision in the boy's tone, but he didn't dwell on it.

"No," Toast said calmly. "You three will stay in the room until Ensigns Drista and Tommy return. It should, hopefully, be no more than thirty minutes."

"Why?" Tubbo asked.

"Because I know him," Toast said, his eyes flicking to Purpled, who quirked his smirk slightly. "At the very least, I've heard of his... exploits. I know he planned to follow Tommy. And he will not."

Purpled frowned. "I wasn't going to do anything." He hesitated. "To the other crew, I mean." Lani groaned quietly.

"I should very well hope you wouldn't have," Toast told him, clasping his hands together. "But I do not wish to file any more incident reports that may occur should Tommy cross paths with anyone that injured him." Tommy winced slightly, the memory of Wilbur's hands around his throat coming to mind, and Purpled's eyes flashed dangerously. "You are a good friend, Purpled—" Tommy and Purpled both snorted in unison, and Toast looked between them, and continued, "—but you see only him, and nothing else."

Purpled leaned back in his seat, his eyes contemplative.

Deny it, Tommy begged him silently. *Deny it*.

Purpled did not deny it.

"I know your type, Ensign," Toast said, and the magenta-eyed boy cocked his head slightly. "And I am proud to have you serve aboard my ship. But you will not be following Ensign Thomas back to the *L'manburg*. In fact, since you are officially a member of my crew—that is an *order*. You will not step foot on the *L'manburg* until you make your return in however many months that may take."

There was a moment of silence. A muscle in Purpled's jaw ticked. Tommy stood with Drista by his shoulder and watched, praying that Purpled wouldn't do something drastic like leap out of his chair and strangle Toast for ordering him so directly like that.

"Noted," Purpled drawled finally. His eyes narrowed, just by a hair. "*Captain*."

Tommy let out a breath of relief, and noted the fact that Purpled's teeth weren't clenched, nor did he look angry, and nor did his fingers twitch towards the phaser strapped to his leg—in fact, he only looked amused, despite the fact that Toast had just banned him from the only other spaceship he had ever served him. It was quite baffling.

But then again, Purpled had always confused Tommy.

Drista commits a felony (we still shouldn't be surprised)

*"There is certain enthusiasm in liberty,
that makes human nature rise above
itself, in acts of bravery and heroism."*

- Alexander Hamilton

Tommy closed the door to Toast's office, and wasn't even particularly surprised to see Rae and Sykkuno ten feet further down the hallway, talking in a low voice to each other that he couldn't understand.

Rae cut herself off when Tommy and Drista walked out, her face brightening. "Hey, Tommy!" she said cheerily. Sykkuno waved as well, a friendly little smile on his face. There was a small nudge of a greeting from him their shared bond, which Tommy acknowledged with a tiny dip of his head. Rae's eyes shifted to Drista. "I see you used my hair dye well. It's a good look on you." She didn't mention the actual cutting of the hair. That would've been a definite lie.

"You gave her the hair dye?" Tommy asked, glancing between the two as Drista touched the shorn ends self-consciously.

"And the scissors," Rae said smugly, crossing her arms.

Tommy raised his eyebrow at her. "You cut your own hair. You couldn't have cut her hair too?"

"Hey," Drista said, sounding offended. "I thought I did a pretty good job."

Tommy bit his tongue and did not tell her that it was inches uneven in some places. She'd figure it out. Using a mirror.

Rae shook her head. "That's not how emotional periods work, Tommy. Changing yourselves superficially after a traumatic event makes you feel better. If I did it, it wouldn't go as well."

Tommy's hand unconsciously went up to the small braid that he'd kept redoing, admittedly shoddily, despite the fact it had once been Technoblade who'd plaited it regularly. He swallowed, feeling the lump in his throat. "Do you have a knife?"

Rae's eyebrows shot up in surprise, her mouth moving for a second before she reached into the pocket of her cargo pants, withdrawing a familiar sheath. She held it out to Tommy wordlessly, who beheld it for a moment before taking it.

"That's *my* knife," he murmured, drawing it and turning the green hilt in his hands. The blade shone, as if it had been newly sharpened. Tommy looked up, meeting Rae's eyes, which glittered with silent understanding. "Where did you get this?"

"Your brother gave it to me," she said softly, a tender feeling of *compassionate-sympathy* flickering its way down their shared bond. Tommy hadn't kept himself open to that in what felt like forever—Techno hadn't been able to communicate well when they'd had the bond, as he hadn't been an Avian, and he hadn't spent so close in proximity to his flock for a long while.

He swallowed. "Which brother?"

Rae's eyes flickered to his neck. "The one that tried to kill you."

He was about to joke that both of them had tried to kill him when the words stuck in his throat as he turned the knife over in his hands and raised it up near his throat. Drista made a small noise of surprise, her hand jerking like she wanted to grab his arm and stop him. She didn't, though, and all four occupants of the hallway watched as Tommy cut the braid off with

a heavy stroke of the knife. It fell into his palms, and some part of him was surprised that it didn't turn to dust, as all things did.

"You look kinda stupid," Drista said, after a moment of silence. Tommy jerked his head up from staring at his shorn hair to stare at her. Drista shifted on her feet. "Like, you have short hair in the back, now. And your hair is still long at the sides. You kind of look like an animal bit off the back of your hair."

"Drista," Rae chastised. "I'll fix it later," she told Tommy, who was frowning self-consciously.

He snorted. "Only if you fix hers too," he said, jerking his arm at the green-eyed Human girl.

Drista sniffed. "Mine's fine."

"It's... really not," Sykkuno pointed out. "It's uneven in the back and—" he cut himself off when Drista leveled him with a half-glare. "I mean, uh, you're right... it's not that bad."

"Sykkuno, you just folded to a sixteen-year-old girl," Rae pointed out.

Tommy held out the braid in Rae's direction. "Can you give this to Techno?" he asked. Rae raised an eyebrow at him, but took it gently in one of her hands, not bothering to ask why he couldn't do it himself. They all knew the truth. "Hair is important to Piglins," he said, shifting slightly. "Or something along the lines."

"I know," Rae said gently, but not unkindly. "Scarra is half-Piglin too."

"Oh," he muttered, flustered. "Right. Yeah."

Rae hesitated. "Does that mean you're not part of his pack anymore?"

He started. "What? No!" Rae tilted her head at him. "I just. I don't know. I can't braid anyway." He didn't want a reminder. "I just need a break. Toast—uh, I mean Captain Toast—said that."

Rae's lips pursed sympathetically. "I'll make sure I'll bring it to your—to *the* Commander personally," she said, wincing slightly at the wrong determiner usage. "With the explanation." She tucked it into one of her pockets gently, zipping it up with her other hand. "Now come on. We don't want to keep our dearest Captain waiting."

"Which one?" Drista asked, her eyebrow raised.

"I suppose Toast, in this case," Rae said with a loud sigh. "Seeing as we'll be heading directly to the medbay on the *L'manburg*." She turned towards Sykkuno. "Could you contact Lieutenant Sapnap and ask him to clear the halls so that Tommy and Drista aren't assailed by their—" Rae stopped. Hesitated. Tilted her head. Then continued, "—former crewmates."

"Now, really—" Tommy started.

"*Former?*" Drista muttered.

"Unless you want everyone there asking when you're coming back, and being invasive," Rae said, cutting across both of them. "Then I would suggest understanding my order." She nodded at Sykkuno. "Commander, if you please."

"On it," Sykkuno said, looking slightly pale, but starting down the hall, his hands already typing away on his datapad.

Rae gave a sharp nod. "Right, well, I'm supposed to escort you to Lieutenant Dream, so we should head out to the transporter room." She put her hand up to her ear, like she was listening to someone on the commlink that every Chief Security Officer always had in their ears. "I believe Lieutenant Fi'hye'vep is on standby."

"That's what Captain Toast said," Drista said agreeably, and Tommy really had to give props to her because her voice only shook a little bit. The piece of paper she had in her hands was getting slightly crumpled from where she was gripping it so tightly. Tommy wondered if crinkled papers were legitimate, but that wasn't really his problem to deal with, so he let it slide.

While Tommy had never met Lieutenant Fi'hye'vep, he had heard of him and so did recognize him based on basic descriptors—Fi'hye'vep was, of course, an Elytrian—Tommy would've been able to tell that just by hearing his name—and he was roughly an inch shorter than Tommy with magenta-feathered wings and a red striped scarf wrapped around his neck. He also had brown curly hair, which reminded Tommy painfully of Wilbur's, just a little bit, though Tommy wasn't ever going to admit that it was a *painful* memory. Wilbur was his brother.

He would not be afraid.

(He was very afraid. He was afraid of seeing him and *being* afraid. Wasn't that just a little bit silly?)

"When Junior Lieutenant Fundy contacts me, I'll send the code to transfer you back," Fi'hye'vep said as the three of them went to go stand on the transporter.

Tommy didn't know much about transporters, but he did know enough to know that both Fundy and Fi'hye'vep were friends, and Fi'hye'vep was also the Chief Tactical Officer, so despite this not being his normal position, he probably knew what he was doing. Fi'hye'vep's eyes shifted to Rae. "Make sure they don't do anything stupid."

"Hey," Tommy said. "I am a mature adult." Fi'hye'vep raised an eyebrow at him. Drista and Rae snorted in unison. "Okay, well, I'm *legally* an adult as both an Avian and a member of the Galactic Rebellion. I don't do stupid things."

"Remember that one time—" Drista started.

"Shut up," Tommy told her. She had serious dirt on him. He hadn't even known which moment she was going to bring up.

Rae cleared her throat. "Hate to interrupt this lovely conversation," she said. "I have something for both of you." She held up a hand in the universal motion for *stop*, causing Fi'hye'vep to pause in his work. Rae reached into one of her many pockets and pulled out two phasers that were already holstered and charged, holding them out to both of them.

Drista took it eagerly, drawing it and aiming it at the wall as she squinted down sight, tilting her head slightly.

Tommy blinked at Rae for a moment before he took it, holding it loosely between two hands. The last time he'd held a phaser, he'd—

—well. Never mind.

"Is this a good idea?" he asked Rae.

There was a small flood of emotion from her that Tommy couldn't really differentiate the difference between. She tilted her head slightly. "You are going to be serving aboard a warship, Tommy. Do you know how to use a phaser?"

"Yes," he said, jerking his head at Drista, who was now spinning it around her finger expertly. "She taught me."

Rae nodded. "Good. I expect you to make good use of it, then."

He swallowed. "You aren't afraid that I'll... I don't know, misuse it or something?"

"How would you 'misuse it?'" Rae asked him gently.

He made a face. "I don't know. If I got scared and shot someone or something." *Or, you know, myself.*

"Do you plan to do that?"

He shook his head rapidly. "No. God, no."

"Then you won't."

Tommy frowned at her. "You can't possibly know that." He strapped it to his leg anyway, pulling the bands tight.

"Good thing *we're* here, then," Drista said sharply. "To keep you from doing something stupid." Yeah, she definitely knew.

Tommy bit his tongue and didn't point out that she also had a very good chance at shooting Dream. In fact, he would bet about twenty credits she would shoot first and within the next half-hour.

"Tommy," Rae said gently. "You are to be serving aboard a warship. This is no longer an exploration vessel. Each and every crewmember, barring, perhaps, the medical crew if they do not wish to due to safety reasons, is required to carry both a close-ranged and a far-ranged weapon."

Drista cleared her throat. "I don't have a knife."

Rae glanced at her. "I'll get Toast to commission you a sword."

The black-haired girl brightened. "I get a *real sword*? For myself?"

"You clearly know how to use one, so yes. If you so desire."

Drista whooped excitedly, holstering her phaser so she could put her arms up and cheer.

"By your leave, Lieutenant," Fi'hye'vep cut in, his eyes glittering. Rae dipped her head. "Energizing."

Tommy closed his eyes as he felt himself transport from the *Mira* to the *L'manburg*—and man, one day he was going to have to figure out how that worked, because he really didn't want to get his particles scattered through space-time. Or however it worked.

The only one in the transporter room of the *L'manburg* was Fundy, who had clearly been expecting them—he must've been communicating live with Fi'hye'vep, then—and his Kitsune ears flattened as he looked at Tommy. He had a bandage around his chest. Tommy winced.

That was probably because Purpled had shot him close-ranged with a stunner not once but twice in the span of an hour. They wouldn't kill, but they would hurt like a bitch. And they probably had.

"Lieutenant Valkyrae," Fundy said, clasping his arms behind his back, his face a solid attempt at professionalism. "It is a pleasure to welcome you aboard the *L'manburg*. Usually, we would have a larger welcome committee, but, well..." he trailed off, glancing at Drista and Tommy. "We don't, for obvious reasons."

Nobody stated what those obvious reasons were. They were, after all, obvious.

"Junior Lieutenant," Rae returned, clearly not expecting Drista or Tommy to talk. "I think that would perhaps be for the better."

"Your commander commed ahead," Fundy said, and Tommy noted that his hands were shaking slightly. "I've taken the liberty of telling Wil—"

Tommy flinched openly—why, *why*, he hadn't *wanted* to flinch; Wilbur was his *brother*—his hand twitching towards the knife on the other side of his waist, as if said Phantom was going to pop out of the walls and kill him. Rae glanced at him, *worry-concern-distress* flitting down their bond. Drista cleared her throat, her green eyes sparkling with anxiety.

Fundy noticed, and corrected himself mid-sentence. "—of telling my Chief Communications Officer to clear the hallways to the medbay. You will not be disturbed."

"Thank you," Rae said kindly, leading the way out. Tommy noted that Fundy stepped as close as he could to the wall, his eyes shining with regret and sadness as they passed.

And Tommy would've liked to pretend that as he passed Fundy, he did not see the Kitsune's eyes flash red. He would've liked to pretend that his fingers did not twitch toward his knife.

He would've been a liar.

And if Fundy noticed, he did not say anything at all.

Drista and Tommy breathed a bit easier as they entered the hallway, which didn't make him feel any better about this entire situation, but, well, he'd always been good at ignoring his own emotions, so he tore the frown that wanted to make its way onto his face from his mouth and plastered on a neutral expression instead.

Next to him, Drista was doing a far better job at it.

True to Fundy's word, there was nobody in the hallways. It looked a bit like a ghost town. Still, Tommy's heart rate was probably a few dozen BPMs above the norm—even a nonmedical officer could have told him that—and he kept glancing around like someone was going to jump him.

In his heart, he knew that nobody would. Toast would not have let them back aboard had there been any chance of danger. Hell, *Purpled*, who had definitely done some illegal things while Tommy had been unconscious, wouldn't have let them aboard.

They managed to arrive at the medbay unscathed, if one didn't count Drista and Tommy jumping at every moving shadow, and Rae opened the door at the push of a button.

There were four people in there. Dream was lying with his back on a cot, looking annoyed, and George and Sapnap were sitting around him, trying to get him to sit back.

Nihachu was sitting at a desk, typing away at a computer. There was a bandage on the bridge of her nose, and her breathing tube was mildly askew, which was definitely out of the norm and meant she was stressed. She glanced up when they entered, her expression flattening.

The parties looked at each other for a second. Nobody moved. Tommy didn't think anybody *breathed*. And that was saying something, because he'd stopped himself from breathing quite a few times in this very room.

"You removed your trackers," Nihachu said quietly, her voice breaking the awkward silence. Drista was so stiff she might as well have been a statue as she stared at her brother, and her brother stared right back. George and Sapnap kept glancing between the two like they would have to tear them apart if they jumped each other.

Tommy cleared his throat, suddenly glad that he'd never encountered Niki in her... evil form, because he couldn't picture her with red eyes. "Lani did," he said, hating the way that Niki clenched her fists and her jaw at the mention of the younger girl. "She used twenty-first-century surgery skills."

"Lani is very talented," Niki said lightly. "I am glad she was able to succeed in her ventures." She nodded at one of the datapads that was on her desk. "I got the full rundown from *Purpled*."

"Are you kidding?" Drista burst out. "You tried to kill her! I don't care that you dropped the charges! She hates herself because of you!"

Niki flinched, and Tommy reached out and grabbed Drista's forearm before she could say anything that would ruin something forever. "Drista," he murmured under his breath. "It's not her fault."

"No," Niki said, because apparently he hadn't been quiet enough. "It is not. But you have every right to resent us, Drista." Her expression was resigned and tired, and she glanced at Dream, who was as still as a statue. "All of us." The Merling stood up suddenly, and both Tommy and Drista instinctively reached for their phasers. Niki noticed—of course she did; she was *Lieutenant Nihachu*—but though her lips compressed into a thin line, she did not say anything about it. "If you will excuse me, I will make my leave now." She moved towards her office door, and had one hand on it when she turned back to Tommy and Drista. "Can tell her that I am proud of what she did for you? That no matter her path—" Again, her gaze shifted, this time to Rae, and Tommy realized she *knew*; of course she knew. "—I will always be proud of her, and I will always be proud to have called her my protégé."

Drista glared at her, but Tommy nodded, and Niki offered him one final sad smile before she vanished behind her closed door.

"Lieutenant Sapnap," Rae said suddenly. "Lieutenant George," she continued, and Blazeborn and Feline snapped their heads up to meet her. "If you could please take your leave."

"But—!" Sapnap started, and George elbowed him so hard that he choked on his own words, glaring weakly at the Feline, who was frowning at him. "Fine."

Drista and Tommy both moved very far away from the doorway so that George and Sapnap could pass, the latter with a bit of a frown and then a wince as he met Tommy's eyes, jerking away before their expressions could convey too much. Eventually, it was just the four of them in the room—three of them standing, one lying down on a hospital bed.

Drista cleared her throat—she'd always been the brave one—and reached into her pocket, where apparently she'd crumpled the piece of paper. Tommy once again wondered at the legitimacy of a wrinkled document, but, again, that was Toast's problem. She walked over to Dream's bedside—not too close; he noted, and he saw Dream flinch slightly because of it, but

the Human had always been good at keeping his expressions close to him. "I need you to sign this," she said, clearing her throat. Again.

Dream looked at her for a moment, and then took the piece of crumpled paper, taking care to not touch Drista's stiff fingers as he tugged it out of her grip. She let go too quickly, and he had to fumble for the catch. Dream used his other hand to smooth it out, his brow furrowing. "What is this?"

Drista let her hands fall at parade rest, which let Tommy know she was extremely uncomfortable with the situation. "It's a permission slip," she said. "For a transfer to the *Mira*."

Dream's head shot up from where he'd been scanning the paper so quickly that it was funny. "*What*."

"It's a request for a transfer," Rae said, stepping in when Drista couldn't seem to get the words out of her throat, her mouth opening and closing but nothing—not even air, Tommy thought with amusement—coming out. "To the *Mira*. That's—"

"I don't have amnesia," Dream snapped, and then took a deep breath in and let it out. "I know what the *Mira* is." Rae raised an eyebrow at him, her face impassive. "Lieutenant." His eyes went back to his sister. "Why?"

"I..." Drista said, blinking large green eyes at him. "I need your signature. I'm sixteen. I don't have... control of my own life."

"No, I *know* why you gave me the paper," Dream said, and Drista flinched slightly, her gaze dropping to the shiny black boots she was wearing. "I want to know why you want a transfer."

Rae cleared her throat. "It wasn't a request, Lieutenant," she said, a warning note in her voice as she took out a pen and stepped closer to his cot, holding it out. "Sign the paper."

Dream looked at her. "I was going to," he said, sounding annoyed. He took the pen, but scanned the page one last time. "A three-month contract, huh?" He glanced at Tommy. "What'd Phil say about this?" Tommy stared at him for a moment, but couldn't hold his gaze. Dream snorted softly. "You haven't told him."

It was not a question.

"We'll get there after you sign the paper," Rae said, starting to sound annoyed. Dream let out a second soft little snort, but penned his signature—which was really just a messy scrawl—across the line where the parent-slash-guardian signature needed to go. He held it out wordlessly, and Drista snatched it from him so quickly that if Tommy didn't know the circumstances better, he would've thought she was eager to leave.

She wasn't, but she was afraid that she *would* be eager to leave. If that made sense.

"Drista," Dream started, when the now-black-haired girl turned to go. She froze, and Tommy raised his eyebrows slightly at the fear written in her green eyes. "I have something for you."

She turned to look at him, her hands fisted at her sides, and Rae opened her mouth to say something, but Tommy nudged her slightly in their shared mind space and she shut her mouth. "What is it."

Dream reached down under his mattress and pulled out a knife, which was the *wrong* thing to do, because Drista pulled out her phaser and had already pulled the trigger by the time she realized that his eyes were still green.

Tommy, however, had expected it—and also just won twenty mental credits—stepping forward and reaching out a hand to knock up the bottom of the phaser so that it missed the top of Dream's head by a scant few inches, hitting the glass shelf behind him, shattering that, but thankfully not shattering the vials that were on top of them. That would've been expensive.

And she had definitely just broke several Galactic laws, one of which was *no firing in designated medical sectors*.

Tommy caught the gun when Drista dropped it, her face white with terror as she clapped both hands over her mouth, staring at her brother, who was frozen from what Tommy read as slight shock and surprise. He should've been a better spy. Or maybe he wasn't adept at understanding trauma in children, because he had pulled out a *weapon* against the person he had attacked—under mind control, sure, but it had still been his body that had done the damage—and expected her to not react.

Then the alarms started wailing, and Tommy flinched. Rae reached out a hand before he stumbled backward and fell over another cot, her lips turned down in disapproval—not at Drista, but at the alarm system.

The office door burst open, and Tommy had Drista's phaser half-raised in his hand before he realized it was Niki—and boy, he was thankful that Lani wasn't here, because he hadn't seen Egg-Niki and he was glad he hadn't—turning on the safety before another shot was fired and dropping it to the ground with a clatter. Drista didn't react, still staring, pale as a ghost, at her brother.

Niki looked at the glass shelf, which had its pieces scattered all over the floor, and holstered her phaser, raising her comm to her lips. "Captain Philza, please call away all security measures. False alarm." She tilted her head, probably hearing the reply—and Tommy was secretly glad he didn't hear the reply himself, because he didn't know if he could deal with Philza's voice after all the events that had occurred in the cafeteria—and looked up at the ceiling. "Clementine, shut off the sirens. Alpha-seven-five."

» Certainly, Lieutenant. «

Tommy perked up. "Clementine!" he said, delighted, as the red lights flickered off and the ringing in his ears returned to normal.

» Welcome back aboard, Tommy Innes. «

"Wow, you sound so happy to see me."

» I am an artificial intelligence. I am not programmed to harbor any sort of terrestrial emotion. «

"You're boring," he muttered.

Rae bent down and picked up Drista's phaser, examining it with a keen eye before rounding on Dream, her brown eyes flashing angrily. "Did you just pull a *knife* on the person you'd *attacked* in the past? What the *hell* was your plan there?"

"I..." Dream trailed off, his eyes darting between the room's four other occupants—Niki, Rae, Drista, and Tommy. "I didn't..."

"You're an idiot," Niki said, raising her voice slightly. Despite being the second-shortest occupant, she somehow seemed taller as she glared at the man. "Why do you even *have* that knife?" Niki tilted her head, frowning at it. "That's not even regulation."

Dream cleared his throat, seeming hesitant to touch the weapon that was now lying on the sheets across his lap. "No, it's my graduation knife."

"Fleet school doesn't—" Rae started.

"The spy—the place where I went to be a special agent," Dream said, cutting across her. "They gave me it when I graduated." His eyes shifted to his sister, whose mouth was now in a thin line. "She never got to, but I think she'd be a better agent than I ever would've."

Tommy snorted under his breath. "Well, you wanted a knife, innit?"

Drista whipped her head to look at him, glaring furiously, but Tommy was just glad that she'd finally *reacted* in some way besides the raw terror that had been written on her face. "I never would've made a good spy," she said stiffly. "I cared—I *care*—too much."

"And despite all of that, you can put those feelings aside and do the right thing, not the thing your heart wants you to do," Dream said calmly, his eyes flicking to Tommy. "There are some people for whom I could not say the same thing."

Purpled, Tommy thought numbly. *Definitely Purpled*. *He would burn the world to the ground so I could live, and would not regret a moment of it.*

"I wouldn't—" Drista started, and then cut herself off, looking like she'd bitten her tongue. Niki hovered nervously in the background, a handheld broom and dustpan in hand as she swept up the glass. "I wouldn't have killed you."

Dream looked like he was going to argue, but Rae cleared her throat and he clearly thought better than that. "I wanted you to have the knife anyway."

"The knife I would've used to *kill* you?" Drista shrieked, and Tommy started. He hadn't known that. "What kind of shitty going-away gift is that?!"

"It's the knife you would've used to do the *right thing*," Dream pressed. "I know you blame yourself for your choices. I know you're leaving now, and I wish I could say that you shouldn't, but..." he shrugged. "It's probably for the best."

Drista bit her lip, and Tommy recognized the tears in her eyes. "Every time I go away from you, something bad happens."

"And when you stayed, something bad happened too," Dream said gently.

"Maybe bad stuff just happens to us," Tommy muttered, and was rewarded with a half-hearted glare from Niki in the back. "Maybe I'm, like, cursed or something."

"I can't—no," Drista said, breaking her own train of thought and pivoting smoothly away. "I can't do this."

"Drista—" Tommy started, reaching for her, but she slapped his hand away and continued walking, her pace just shy of a jog.

"No," she said. "I just—no."

Tommy watched blearily as she left, her dark hair swishing around the doorway. Rae let out a small sigh. He turned back to see Dream staring after her, his eyes sad. Tommy swallowed, stepping forward and holding out a hand. "I'll give it to her."

"She doesn't want it."

"She will," Tommy said. "She will eventually, and she will regret not having it, because it reminds her of you." He tilted his head. "*You* won't be using it."

"No," Dream said, blinking rapidly. "Never again, I should think. Never again." He took the knife and held it out to Tommy, who took the sheath in his hand—his good hand; his right hand, because he still couldn't bend the fingers in his left all the way to his palm, and he was avoiding any talk of amputation.

"Good day, Lieutenant," Rae said, touching Tommy's shoulder and signaling they should be heading off—Tommy secretly thought it might be to stop Drista from causing any trouble, wherever she had wandered off to.

"Good day, Lieutenant," Dream returned, eyes flickering to Tommy. "You as well, Tommy." Tommy nodded, unable to say anything in return. "If it's worth anything, then I didn't mean it."

"Except you did," he said, pulling up Purpled's words from Brooke's medical bay. "You wanted her to kill you."

"I didn't *want* her to kill me," Dream said, wincing slightly. "But I would have agreed with her if she had. It was the right thing to do with the options given."

"Good thing we created another option, then," Rae said icily, and then Tommy bid goodbye to Niki as well, who told him not to kill himself—jokingly, he thought, but with her, he was never quite sure—on the *Mira*.

They exited the medbay, and Tommy didn't know whether he was happy or sad about that interaction. He certainly didn't feel any better—but at least Drista had gotten her signature.

Speaking of Drista, he had no idea where she was.

"Clementine?" he asked hesitantly.

» Ready and waiting. «

"I'm surprised she listens to you," Rae comments idly. "Seeing as you are no longer a member of this crew, technically."

» Thomas Innes is the son of my creator, Lieutenant Valkyrae. I will always have a—metaphorical, of course—ear out for him, even if I am unable to follow his commands. «

Rae snorted softly. "Advanced A.I. you have there," she muttered, her voice strangely suspicious.

"Where's Drista?" Tommy asked.

» She is currently in her old room. I recommend that you do not disturb her. She is, as you living organisms say, *having a moment*. «

Tommy swallowed. "Of course."

He wasn't stupid. He knew what that meant.

There was a moment of silence as the two hovered in the hallway, unsure of what to do. Tommy, staring at the knife in his hand, broke it first.

"This isn't fair."

"What isn't fair?" Rae asked gently.

"They're all good people!" he spat out angrily. "They've suffered enough! They deserve a good ending!"

Rae raised an eyebrow. "They?" she parroted, catching his specific word choice.

He looked away, ashamed.

Rae shook her head, her brown hair falling across the front of her green uniform. "This isn't a story, Tommy. Happy endings aren't real. They don't exist. Someone has to die first. Someone leaves. Empires fall. Relationships fail. People grow apart. And someone dies last—someone always dies last, alone on their deathbed. The only thing that exists is happy moments. Treasure them. Treasure them, before the end." Despite her depressing words, Tommy felt slightly mollified by her speech. Rae smiled, reaching out to tug on one of his bangs, and Tommy scowled playfully at her. She waited a moment before continuing. "And count yourself among your peers in your words, for you were the leader of the Children's Rebellion, and you are the reason some still breathe today."

Tommy looked at his feet, blinking furiously. "Some of them don't. Not anymore."

"You cannot save everyone," the other Avian chastised gently. "Every lesson about death I have ever learned has taught me that. But you saved Purpled. And Ranboo. And you saved Drista and Lani too, on Icarus 45-HB. You brought Tubbo back to life." She tapped him on the chest, and Tommy met her deep brown eyes. "And through *you*, we managed to save your crew. Without you, they would all have fallen to darkness, and perhaps infected the universe."

Tommy was already shaking his head. "I didn't save Ranboo, though. I failed him."

"You did save him," Rae corrected. "Once."

(On a planet long ago with golden grass and scarlet skies. In a place where safety had been prevalent, and learning had been behind enjoyment. In a place where wood had burnt to grey ash and blood had flowed more freely than water—in a place where the Children's Rebellion had risen and fallen as quickly as the lifespan of a moth.)

"Without him, and without his *sacrifice*—" she stressed the word, and Tommy winced. "Commander Technoblade, your brother, would be dead."

"No," he said stubbornly. "Chroma was there because of *me*."

"Don't blame yourself for other people's actions. His actions, despite being *for* you, are not yours, and you did not decide them. Do not let that Avian decide your destiny. That is up to you, and you alone."

Tommy licked his lips, finding that they were suddenly chapped, like a cold breeze had just flown down the hallway. "Is it?" he whispered. "Or was it already written for me?"

Tommy Gets Angry About Photos

*"Love is what you've been through
with somebody."*

- James Thurber

Toast's office had a connecting sitting room, which made it easier to be comfortable, as it had a couch, two loveseats, and two leather armchairs that seemed to be preserved Terran antiques, if the wear had anything to say about them.

There was also a mini-bar.

"No drinking," Toast said, when Tubbo glanced over at it. "I know alcohol makes it easier, but let's try not to be drunk during any formal meetings about transferring crew members." Drista snorted under her breath as she sat down heavily on the couch, Lani and Tubbo following to sit down on either side of the dark-haired Human. Purpled and Tommy sat down on the smaller couch.

"I wish I could just leave," Tommy muttered under his breath, kicking his legs out as anxiety started to set in.

"It's fine," Purpled said, far too cheerfully. "I have a gun. He won't."

Toast, who was in one of the single armchairs, threw him a sharp look. "If you scorch my walls, Purpled Sta'aria, I will put you on probation so quickly that you will never be on the ground team for a mission for the next seven weeks."

He had noted Purpled's real last name twice in his life—once at an introduction from a blank-faced guard when he was younger; back when everything was just a dream and the loss of his family had been fresh—and the second on a list of names that had been marked *safe*.

(He had lied and told the boy with that name to run anyway.)

Purpled's eyes flashed, and danger screamed through the air, sharp as the blade of a knife. "Don't call me that." Tommy nudged him gently with the toe of his foot, and Purpled sent him a quick glare.

Toast paused, tilting his head. Tension was thick and palpable in the room as the adult Human chose his words carefully. "I apologize," he said genuinely. "I know you don't like going by that name."

"It was my—our—*father's* name, not mine," Purpled snarled. "Those—that sorry excuse for a Human being can keep his damn familial name. I am not part of it."

"Well, you need a last name for your papers, then," Toast said, and Tommy noted that while he was being straightforward, he wasn't being cruel. "I'll send in the official documents for a last name change."

Purpled frowned, but surprise shone for a moment—and Purpled wasn't surprised very often. "Really? We've been applying for years. There's a long line because of the war. It's on standstill as everyone turns to warfare." He sounded slightly bitter.

Toast, who was the captain of a warship, and quite well-versed in warfare, thankfully chose to ignore his tone. "Sure. I'm a government official, being an Admiral—or whatever I am, nowadays. An admiral of a cruiser, which has never happened in the history of the Galactic Rebellion, but then again, most things that happen around you six are abnormal." Toast snorted under his breath. "Anyway, I'm owed quite a few favors. A legal last name change is at the bottom of the illegal things I could do."

Purpled stared at him for a moment, and if Tommy didn't know him better, he would've thought that he was thinking about it.

But Tommy *did* know better, and he saw the wonder reflected in the Human's pupils. The wonder and the amazement—and perhaps respect, but Tommy wasn't sure of that one, because he could count the number of people that Purpled respected on one hand, and still have fingers left over. And Tommy was *not* on that list.

"*Hilahnyien*," Purpled said suddenly, and Tommy looked at him sharply, because that word reminded him of the Words the Starborne had said in the cafeteria that had caused the Egg to go bye-bye, though what Purpled had said obviously had less power behind it. He was not, after all, a Starborne.

"Excuse me?" Toast said primly, arching an eyebrow. Drista was frowning, meeting Tommy's gaze with a slightly confused shrug, clearly catching on, same as him, to the strange way that Purpled was saying that word.

"*Hilahnyien*," Purpled repeated. "That's the name I want on my papers." He lifted his chin, as if daring anyone to question it.

"*Hilahnyien*," Tubbo spoke up dubiously.

"No," Purpled said, though not particularly unkindly. "*Hilahnyien*."

"That's what I said."

"No, it's not," Tommy interjected, before the two of them could devolve into an argument. "You said *Hilahnyien*. Purpled said *Hilahnyien*."

"That's literally the same word."

"No, it's not," Purpled and Tommy said at the same time, and then looked at each other, surprised.

Toast cleared his throat, looking amused. "I'll note that down and send the request form," he told Purpled. "Though I do want to know where you got—"

There was a knock on the door that caused Toast to cut himself off.

Tommy stiffened, shoving his hands under his thighs before he could decide to do something stupid. He'd left his new phaser on the desk in Toast's main office before he did something like Drista had done in the medbay—Rae had taken the two weapons she'd left behind, the knife and the gun, and had said she was going to drop them off in Drista's new quarters.

Toast glanced around the room, his eyes lingering on Tommy for far too long before he gave a subtle nod. "Come in, please."

"Purpled," Drista hissed suddenly. "Please remove your hand from your phaser."

Purpled grumbled something under his breath, but Toast gave him a sharp look and he—surprisingly—holstered his phaser, which made Tommy raise his eyebrows at him in astonishment.

And because he was looking at Purpled, he missed the exact moment that Philza Minecraft entered the room. The only reason he remembered was that he saw Tubbo's jaw twitch slightly out of the corner of his eye, and Tommy whipped his head around to stare at the Elytrian.

The Elytrian that had raven-black feathers, a near-perfect uniform, clean-cut boots, blonde hair, and blue eyes.

(Red eyes.)

Purpled was already grabbing his arm as Tommy instantly reached for the knife, and Tommy coughed and played it off like he'd been scratching his thigh.

Judging by the saddened expression that crossed Philza's face, as well as the small wince from Lani, he didn't play it off very well.

Toast pointed at the chair to his right, which was thankfully ten feet and a glass table away from Tommy. Which, actually, in hindsight, had probably been the whole idea. "Take a seat, would you." It was not a question.

Philza raised an eyebrow but didn't argue, walking around to sit on the edge of the seat, as since had been designed and created before Humans had even known there were other species in the Universe, it was not Elytrian-friendly and did not at all meet current standards of chairs.

He met Tommy's gaze with pity in them, and Tommy raised his chin and stared him down, pretending that his left hand wasn't pinned under his leg and that Purpled didn't have a firm grip on his right forearm.

"So," Phil said quietly. "That's what had Techno in a tizzy."

Tubbo winced, grimacing. Lani turned her head to look at her brother, who was currently pretending that a single name hadn't made him flinch.

Tommy glanced down at the shorn ends of what had been his braid self-consciously. "Rae will fix it."

"Oh?" Philza said, and Tommy had the distinct feeling he'd said the wrong thing, because Drista exhaled sharply through her nose and Tubbo shifted, looking nervous. He didn't know what, though. "Will she, now?"

"Captain," Toast interrupted, breaking the tense silence. "You were invited to this meeting to oversee the request for a transfer from the five of them, not make pointed remarks toward my Chief Security Officer."

Well. Straight to the point, then.

Philza started, his mouth instantly opening to argue, but then he paused and thought about it, his blue eyes turning sad. "I see," he said finally, looking down the line of teenagers. Drista met his gaze, her green eyes prideful, and Tommy would bet every credit he had—which was not a lot—that she was just doing it because she hadn't been able to stare Dream down. Tubbo's brows were furrowed as he stared off at the wall, and Lani kept glancing up at the Elytrian every few seconds like he was going to teleport. Purpled was completely deadpan, his mouth in a thin line—not particularly out of the ordinary, that. Tommy found that he couldn't really look directly at him, and his hands were still shaking. "And what is their opinion on this matter?" Philza asked eventually, his voice firm, but not accusatory. Tommy watched as his wings betrayed him, twitching ever-so-slightly with agitation.

"I am not asking for your approval on the matter, Captain," Toast replied before one of them could do so much as open their mouth. "I am requesting that you sign the transfer papers." He held out a clipboard with five thick pieces of paper on them, a pen gripped under his thumb.

Philza looked down at the clipboard, and then back up to Toast. "This is a warship, *Admiral*. You cannot expect me to sign off on children—"

"Last I checked," Purpled interrupted, his voice cool. "There are only two children among us." Lani and Drista both whipped their heads to stare at him. "The rest of us are legally adults."

Philza stared at him, his blue eyes hardening, but no hatred showed in them. "I will not send *my child*, then—" Tommy did flinch at that one, and Philza paused, but did not call him out, continuing, "—onto a cruiser that was created to fight battles and blow up in a ball of fire somewhere in some *fucking* battle in the middle of some unknown region of space!"

There was a pause.

"I'm glad you have such *faith* in my crew," Toast drawled, and it was not exactly kind. "And I'm just going to ignore the fact that what you said is borderline treason for a Galactic Rebellion *Captain*. Have some more decorum than that."

Philza winced, lowering his eyes. "My apologies. Admiral." Toast inclined his head slightly, his gaze remorseful. "I only... disagree with putting teenagers so young aboard a starship made for war."

"We're capable of it," Drista said flatly.

"Capable, yes," Philza told her. "That doesn't mean you should be."

"Well, life fuckin' sucks like that, doesn't it?" Tommy snorted under his breath, loud enough that the entire room heard it. He winced slightly as the attention turned to him. "I only mean that we've all seen more than we should have."

"Besides," Toast cut in. "What would you have me do, Captain?" He raised an eyebrow. "Put them onto some other exploratory vessel with a captain and a crew that doesn't understand them?"

"And you do?" Philza shot back.

"Does *anyone*?" Toast said flatly, and Philza shut up. Tommy leaned back, impressed, and he saw that Purpled was frowning intriguingly. "Would you have me follow their original plan, which was to resign from the line of active duty?"

"Was this all *your idea*?" Philza asked him, his voice cold.

"No," Purpled interjected. "It was mine. Lani and Tubbo were going to step down, and I convinced them otherwise. Drista followed."

Philza looked at him, frowning dubiously. "Why?"

Purpled lifted his chin. "Our place is among the stars," he said simply.

"Even if it is to die?"

The magenta-eyed Human shrugged. "I'd rather go out in a ball of fire than get knifed in the back by my own brother."

"*Purpled*," Tommy hissed, as Philza winced, a sore spot clearly hit. Purpled did not look very apologetic, but at least he shut up. Tommy sighed and looked at his adoptive father, who appeared uneasy. "He's an idiot, but he's right. I'm not going to ground myself because I am afraid. If I take one step back, then all my progress will have been for nothing."

"Progress?" Purpled muttered under his breath. "What progress?"

Tommy elbowed him. Hard. "It is my destiny to travel the stars," he said, and paused when Purpled did a full-body flinch at the word *destiny*. Huh. That was odd. "That is who I am... Dad."

"Tommy..." Philza whispered.

"Does it matter if we're aboard an exploratory vessel or a warship?" he asked tiredly. "I seemed to have way too many near-death experiences in my time serving on the *L'manburg* as it was."

"Amen to that one," Tubbo muttered.

"Chroma is hunting me down," he continued, his voice flat. "If I stay planet-side, hiding like some weakling in the ground, waiting for him to find me, then I am no better than he. If I am going to *die*, let it be in my own way. I will not have my last years having been alive because

I ran and hid. I am many things, Phil, but a coward is not one of them." Purpled was looking at him, his bright magenta eyes displaying no open emotion. "Space is my life. Don't take that away from me."

"Tommy, you're only eighteen," Phil said softly. "You'd be one of the youngest to ever serve aboard a warship." He glanced at the couch on his right. "Lani would *be* the youngest. I don't want to get that letter, because that's all I'd bloody get if you died in space." He shook his head, his wings drooping. "I do not want to receive that notification of condolence."

"I'm going to die before you anyway," Tommy pointed out, and this time, *everyone* in the room flinched. "I am an Avian. We burn like the brightest stars, and we burn out too soon. You will outlive every single person in this room, no matter when we die."

Lani, who had brought her knees to her chest sometime during Tommy's rant, finally spoke up after he trailed into silence. "Besides," she said carefully. "Admiral—uh, Captain Toast is right. We can't transfer to another ship, because that would be hell. Planet-side isn't really a place meant for people like us. What would you have us do?" She tilted her head thoughtfully. "It's not like the *L'manburg* was safe. Would you really expect us to be fine after the hours spent in a room with... with our friends and family trying to... to kill us?"

"You cannot expect me to be okay with putting a group of teenagers, *legal or not*, on the front lines," Phil said weakly.

"Ah, I have a plan for that, don't worry," Toast said, raising a hand. "We wouldn't subject them to a fight within our first week. There's a bit of training needed for that. I have a few small missions they could do in the meantime."

Philza stared at him, and then held out his hand, slumping slightly and appearing to age ten years. "Give me the pen," was all he said, sounding defeated. Perhaps he was.

Perhaps they all were.

Tommy stared at the corkboard in his room on the *L'manburg*, where he'd been dropped off by Philza and the rest of the Traumatized Teenagers™ to gather his stuff.

He'd said exactly three words to his adoptive father, and none of them had particularly been emotional. He'd thought that Phil was disappointed, but really Tommy was just embarrassed he couldn't look the Elytrian in his eyes.

It wasn't his fault.

He wondered if Philza thought about Pogtopia, and what the four of them had seen together. He knew that *he* did—he thought about young Techno's gaunt face as he desperately searched for the parent he would never find; he thought about the lonely look on Philza's face and tried not to picture Kristin waiting by a window back on Terra, growing up through the years faster than an Elytrian ever would.

You will outlive every single person in this room, no matter when we die.

He winced at his own words, wishing he could take them back. They were true, sure, but the truth hurt.

Philza Minecraft was both cursed and gifted with the long life of an Elytrian, which was well over two hundred years—the longest average lifespan of any race ever discovered, except for possibly the Starborne and the Sl'ymǎ, though perhaps they didn't count because for all he knew they were immortal. Phil would outlive every single member of his immediate family, his adopted family—that being, of course, Tommy, Technoblade, and Wilbur—and perhaps even his blood-related children, if he ever chose to have any.

Tommy Innes was many things, but long-lived was not one of them, and he had seen many people die, and he knew that he would see many more fall, but one thing he did know was that he would never see any of his friends—except for Rae and Sykkuno—pass from old age. He was not cursed to be left behind as generations passed on—he was short-lived, and Phil was not, and perhaps both ways were blessings and both ways were curses, in the end.

Tommy reached out and took one of the photos that was attached to the corkboard by a dull pushpin—Niki had *insisted* they be dull, just in case he stabbed himself or something, which was quite silly, because he now had a gun in a holster at his waist and a knife at his hip. He felt the corner of his lips tug up into a smile as he stared at the scene—at one of the polaroid's from Foolish's camera years and years ago. It was a stupid selfie, nearly identical and indifferentiable from the squished-up groups of kids on social media, except this one was of six children having a picnic on golden grass with a pale pink sky permeating what little could be seen of the horizon.

Ranboo, on the bottom left, was the one who had taken the photo, as he'd been able to reach further as an Enderian, enabling them to be able to take the photo in the first place, his arm just barely in screen, and scowling slightly at Tommy, who was half on his lap with his eyes squeezed shut, laughing at something stupid. Based on the fact that Purpled, who was on the bottom right, was rolling his eyes, he clearly thought Tommy was an idiot.

But when Tommy squinted he saw that a small smile was arched across Purpled's face, betraying his attempt at seemingly finding them all ridiculous.

Alyssa was just barely peeking over Ranboo's head, her chin tilted up and a peace sign flashing over the top of Ranboo's unruly two-toned hair, creating two 'bunny-ears' with the tips of her claws. Her ears were standing straight up, betraying her happiness, and she was in the middle of laughing at the antics of Tommy and Ranboo.

Grian, in the top-middle of the photo, was standing the furthest back due to his grey-purple wings, and holding two thumbs-up awkwardly, his eyes twinkling with mirth. He had been the oldest one there, but that had never stopped him from joining in with the pranks—actually, he'd probably been the biggest enabler there, come to think of it.

Foolish was flipping off the camera. He needn't say more about *that*.

Tommy's heart hurt as he clutched the picture, trying his best not to ruin it. Sure, there were copies back on Pogtopia, but these were the *original*, and he would never want to ruin such beautiful memories.

He looked up at the corkboard, smiling softly. There were seven other polaroid's from Pogtopia—Purpled hadn't wanted any of them when they'd recovered them, and Tommy had

taken the three that Ranboo had when he had died. There were a few more photos too—pictures that he'd gathered over the months.

There was one of him and Sniff, taken by Drista when she'd come to get him due to curfew, sitting at the edge of the Golden Gate Bridge, in the middle of one of their discussions—note: arguments—and Tommy had his hand up, probably ranting about Sniff's engineering abilities. The girl—the *Elytrian* in question was in the middle of laughing, her hand braced out so that she wouldn't fall. Now that Tommy was looking, he could easily note that when she turned, she would automatically shift to make room for wings that she no longer had. He could remember specific moments of when she would roll her shoulders, a particular look crossing her face, or when she would avoid answering whether her parents had adopted her or not. He had always assumed, but... he'd been wrong, in the end.

He looked up at the ceiling of the *L'manburg* and wished that wherever she was; she'd found her wings.

There was another photo of the six of them—back when there had been six Traumatized Teenagers™—all asleep in the rec room, either on each other or on the furniture. Purpled was actively grabbing Tommy's ankle, and he was attached to Tubbo's waist, his ear flat against the Shulker's chest. Tommy felt another smile tug at his lips as he stared down at the picture. Wilbur had taken that one.

Happier times.

There was also one of Drista beating the shit out of him with foam balls, but the less that was said about him, the better.

Tommy sighed, gathering up the remaining photos and placing them carefully in a tin, and then into the moving box that he'd asked for—roughly three-by-three feet. Brodin, the Quartermaster, had asked him if he'd wanted a bigger box, or more boxes, but he'd only shook his head and said no.

He could fit his entire life in that box, probably.

Tommy went over to his book collection next, picking up the small collection of actual paper-bound books that he had and flipping through them. His hand caught on one of the pages, and he opened the seventh Percy Jackson book to stare at the crushed allium, which was now pressed between two thin pieces of plastic to act as a bookmark. He'd originally put it there as a joke, and had only uncovered it, having forgotten about it, after Ranboo had died.

That had to be the universe playing a joke on him, though.

Tommy let his heart lurch and spared a few seconds of tears before placing the series and all the other ones he owned, sparse as they were, into the box as well. He left behind his *L'manburg* uniforms—Brodin had already assured them that Purpled would transfer the records of their sizing over to the *Mira* for fittings before the Human officially gave up his power as the Quartermaster of the *L'manburg*.

He thumbed the small stitching of the pixelated heart and the two dark ridges that lay in the middle, and tried to think about wearing the official symbol of the *Mira*—a small black and white TV with a cartoon smile. He would miss the *L'manburg*, even if he would come back one day.

It had been his choice to leave, and some part of him regretted it, if only for some of the few good memories of his life.

Tommy put the uniform back in the drawers and shoved them close with his knee, picking up a few small belongings here and there—a pin that Lani had gotten him on Terra; a car that Tubbo kept mansplaining to him about centripetal force or whatever it was that allowed him to make the car zoom on near-ninety-degree planes. A stupid red and white bucket hat that Wilbur had seen in the store and had guffawed so hard they'd been thrown out until he'd snuck back in and bought it, claiming it made Tommy look like a *mini-Philza*. A magnetic floating yellow ball that Drista had gotten him as she'd claimed it reminded her of their lessons together.

And a golden feather from a friend.

Tommy picked it up carefully, holding the golden chain that Technoblade had picked up from somewhere—or maybe he'd just had it; Techno had a *lot* of gold—that was attached to the base of the feather. Sniff had never had any feathers to give, so she'd made her own. He

smiled sadly, gripping the chain close to his chest. He rarely wore it—he'd worn it for her funeral and then again for a ceremonial event that Philza had had him attend due to him being a ward of an Elytrian or whatever, and it was customary to wear the feathers of the fallen at many Elytrian events. Tommy gently placed it back into the black leather box and put it carefully into one of the corners of the moving box, tucking the fabric of the fingerless gloves Kristin had gotten him at some outpost or another.

After he was done, his room looked as bare as the day he had moved in—like anyone could come and replace him. He winced. He hoped that Philza wouldn't get any new officers, but because so many were leaving he bet they'd get a few new replacements, which would suck. Hopefully they wouldn't take *his* room.

It wasn't exactly his room anymore, was it?

Tommy knelt down by his bed and pulled out the beautiful violin case from under it, his ruined hand placed gently on the lid. Another gift from Sniff that he would never be able to use again. Because of Chroma.

It was always Chroma's fault. All of his problems led back to Chroma, didn't they?

He could not bring himself to open it. He could not bring himself to face a lot his past, nowadays.

Tommy picked up the case and placed it on his bed, and he was reaching for the box so he could haul it closer and check it one final time when a familiar voice echoed into the now-barren room.

"Tommy?"

the final goodbyes

Chapter Notes

IT'S BEEN A MONTH

(shit went down; imagine everything bad (except pregnancy) that happens to fanfic writers and you get the idea)

ALSO IT'S SATURDAY! the fanfic gods can't smite me down if I surprise them with dropping a chapter on Saturday morning instead!

SUCK IT LOSERS

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*"Some things are so unexpected that
no one is prepared for them."*

- Leo Rosten

It was Wilbur's voice.

Tommy glanced at the small mirror on the wall, unable to turn and meet the Phantom face-to-face. "Wilbur," he said evenly.

"Tell me it's not true."

Tommy lowered his head to stare at his feet. He had hoped he'd be gone by the time this rumor spread around the ship. He had hoped he wouldn't have to face this. "What?" he said.

"Don't try that bullshit tone with me, Tommy Innes," Wilbur snarled, and Tommy flinched at his tone, his hand twitching up towards the bruises that no longer lay on his skin. Wilbur paused for a second, but continued, "I know you better than that."

Tommy pivoted smoothly, swallowing past the lump in his throat as he stared over his brother's ear, unable to maintain direct eye contact. "Do you?"

There was another bit of silence.

"I'd like to believe I do," Wilbur said finally, and Tommy finally met his gaze. Wilbur looked terrible—his ordinarily perfect hair was in disarray, he had deep shadows beneath his eyes, and he was wearing his sleep uniform like he'd just rolled out of bed.

Perhaps he had. It was, after all—he glanced at the clock—0524. Tommy was supposed to be back on the *Mira* and gone by 0700.

"Would you have left a note?" Wilbur asked, his hands clenching into fists. "Would you have left *anything*?"

"Of course I would've!" he snapped, slightly aghast at the audacity Wilbur had to accuse him of that. "You're my family!"

"But apparently we're not good enough to stay!" Wilbur shouted, his voice echoing off the walls of the room.

"That's a *selfish* take," he hissed. "I can't stay. I can't do that alone."

Wilbur paused, his brown eyes glittering. "You're *all* leaving."

It was not a question. Then again, Wilbur had been trained in the art of diplomacy, and he knew how to pick apart word choices.

"Yes," he said. Wilbur nodded, his lips contorting into a sort of ugly sneer, and he felt the need to add, "I was not the first."

"No," Wilbur said, shaking his head. "You followed Purpled." He sounded bitter. "You always will."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snarled, rising defensively to the protection of his friend.

"You will follow him to your grave," Wilbur told him. "You and he are on a reckless path of self-destruction and *revenge*. Revenge against Chroma."

"CHROMA DESTROYED EVERYTHING I EVER KNEW!" he screamed.

"And then you found more things to know!" Wilbur shouted, and he was crying now; tears glittering on his face. "You found us! You found this ship! You found a home!" Tommy opened his mouth to interject something—he didn't quite know what—but Wilbur barreled on. "Don't leave me behind, Tommy. Don't do that to me. Not again."

"I'll..." he trailed off, thinking of a teenage boy on the steps of the Fleet Academy in a memory from a long time ago. "I'll come back," he said finally. "Three months. Promise."

He was surprised to find he meant it.

"You are about to serve on a warship," Wilbur said. "Don't make promises you cannot keep."

"What would you have me do?" he asked softly, stealing the words Purpled had spoken to Philza only a few hours prior. He wanted to scrub the tears that were forming under his eyes, but found that he was too frozen to move.

Wilbur reached out a hand. "Stay."

He was already shaking his head. "I can't do that."

"Why not?" his—his *brother* asked, his voice pleading.

"Because every time I stare at you," he whispered. "I feel your fingers around my neck, stopping my breath from escaping my lungs, and I wonder what it would be like to have let you kill me if Purpled had not been there to save me. And sometimes I wish it *had* gone that way, because that would make it all easier."

Wilbur stared at him, horrified. "Tommy—"

"And I remember your smile," he continued. "I remember your smile in the cafeteria. It was more of a maniacal grin, but whatever." Wilbur grimaced and looked away, but there was regret and sorrow lingering in his eyes like he understood. "What was that you said?" Wilbur looked up at him, a confused frown marring his features. "When you were going to blow up the ship," he prompted, and recognition flashed in his brother's eyes. "What was that you said?"

"It was never meant to be," Wilbur whispered, horror glistening in his chocolate-brown eyes as tears streaked his cheeks.

"You were wrong," Tommy said with a tired and ugly twist of his lips. "It was never meant to *last*."

He threw open the door to the landing bay—they were taking a shuttle instead of the transporter because of all the boxes; Tubbo had at *least* six—and Lani, Tubbo, Purpled, and Drista were already there, waiting haphazardly around brown moving boxes looking like they didn't want to be there. Captain Toast was speaking to Kristin, of all people—Kristin, whom he hadn't seen during the entirety of the whole Egg dilemma—if he called it enough meaningless words, it would become meaningless, right?—Kristin, who saw him and smiled at him with pretty brown eyes.

He didn't see them flash red in his mind, and was gladdened by it. Maybe there was a reason she was there instead of any others.

Toast turned when the door opened. "Ah, Tommy, we've been waiting—"

Tommy ignored him, walked over to Purpled, and decked him in the face.

There was a crunch.

He didn't really feel that sorry about it.

"OH MY GOD!" Lani shrieked, and Drista was already reaching for her phaser before she remembered that it was still on the *Mira*; a precaution Rae had taken when she'd realized giving a traumatized teenager a gun and then placing her onboard a ship full of the people that had *given* her some of those horrific memories was probably a bad idea. Tubbo, who looked exhausted, had an extraordinarily slow reaction time, and Purpled was already rubbing at his nose—definitely broken; as it was crooked—and grimacing at the pain that it was probably causing.

"Why the fuck did you do that?" Drista demanded, and Tommy looked at her. She relaxed when she met his eyes.

(She'd relaxed when she'd met his eyes because they weren't red.)

"I deserved it," Purpled said, and Tommy nearly snickered at the sound of his voice. He sounded like he had a bad cold.

"You don't even know what he *did*," Lani stressed, frowning at Tommy.

"I have my reasons," Tommy muttered, wincing and shaking out his fist when he realized that it hurt.

"You need to squeeze your fist before impact," Toast suggested, and Tommy looked at him. The Human's dark eyes were glittering with interest. Kristin looked anxious, her hands on the skirt of her uniform, like she wanted to rush over and help Purpled. Fortunately, she had enough sense in her—unlike her husband and *other* sons—to not. "The knuckles of your index and middle finger should hit him, not your actual fingers." He brought up his hand and tapped the area he was talking about.

"Shouldn't you be mad at him?!" Drista asked, sounding slightly scandalized. "He just punched Purpled!"

"According to Purpled, it was deserved," Toast said with a shrug. "Which I suppose is consent enough."

Captain Toast had issues.

That was fine; Tommy had issues too.

Lani had her emergency medkit out—it was new, Tommy noted, and probably a farewell gift from Niki, but nobody had the balls to point that out—and was kneeling by Purpled's side, flicking his hand away from his face. "Don't keep touching it. I need to set it properly." She looked up at Tommy, glaring at him. "You *arse*."

"Id fairdess, I didn't tell hib about Ca'jat anb Mellohi," Purpled said, sounding like he'd had the flu for six weeks.

Lani drew back like she'd been shocked. "What's wrong with Ca'jat and Mellohi?! Are they not coming with us?"

There was a bit of silence.

Tommy looked at the ground, and Purpled had enough humanity left in him to grimace slightly, and then wince when that pulled at his nose.

"Oh my God, you don't *know*," Kristin said, and everyone in the room turned to look at her. "How do you not know?!"

"Even *I* don't know what you're talking about," Toast said, looking puzzled.

"They're dead," Tommy said flatly.

There was a second bit of silence.

"What?" Drista asked, her voice shaking slightly. "Who?" Of course, she'd had a bit of an attachment to Mellohi—they were both bitches, so they'd been perfect for each other. And bullying him, though Drista's 'claws' were foam yellow balls.

Well, Drista was still a bitch. Mellohi was just dead.

A tear prickled at the corner of his eye, and he ignored it.

"Did the Egg kill them?" Toast asked, a bit of pity on his face before he successfully managed to erase it.

"Yes," Purpled said, and then gave a low grunt as Lani reached over and set the bone in his nose back into position. "Ow. That fucking hurt."

"Bastard," Lani muttered. "Go see Brooke or something on the *Mira*. I'm not fixing your bullshit."

Purpled shook his head slightly, like he was clearing stars from his eyes. "My dear brother killed them," he said with a slight grimace.

"I'm assuming that's the one in the coma," Toast said after a moment. "Seeing as you have two brothers, and one of them is a medical officer." Purpled gave a small tilt of his head.

"Why would the Egg kill two dhi'sks?" Drista demanded. She was crying, Tommy noted. "What purpose is there behind it? They're defenseless animals!"

"I would argue your definition on defenseless," Tommy pointed out. He was allergic to something in the air. Had to be. That's certainly why his eyes were watering. No other reason.

(Why did everything around him die?)

Purpled sighed. "Punz cornered me," he said, sounding tired, which was a new low for him. He didn't like showing any sign of exhaustion or weakness. Ever. "On the bridge. When I was trying to send the message. Mellohi and Ca'jat were there—I think they were in the lift or something. I don't know." His eyes turned testy, and Tommy knew he wouldn't tell this story again. "They attacked Punz. He killed them." Purpled peeked over at Drista. "So. Not defenseless after all."

The Human girl was too busy crying to pay any attention to his poor attempt at a joke.

"Mellohi and Ca'jat put Punz in a coma?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow.

Purpled glanced at him. "Yes," he said. "Have you seen the scratches? They're pretty nasty."

"Have *you* seen the scratches?" Kristin spoke up. "I have it under good authority that you haven't visited either of your brothers."

Purpled gave her a deadpan stare. "I was there when they were given."

Kristin paled. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'd forgotten."

"It's fine," Purpled said, waving a hand. Tommy was half-surprised to hear that he actually meant it. "There are more important things to worry about."

"Or you're too afraid," Drista muttered.

"So speaks the one who shot at her sibling," Purpled said nonchalantly, and Drista turned on him, furious, before Lani pulled her back and whispered something that made the dark-haired girl turn towards her with mild interest, her anger dissipating. Purpled ignored her, turning back to Tommy. "Who told you?"

He raised an eyebrow, and felt some wretched joy in his chest when he was able to spit, "*Your* brother."

Purpled stared him down. "I'm assuming the one *not* in a coma," he said, mimicking Toast's tone as he repeated the captain's words word-for-word.

"It should not have been Ponk that told me," Tommy said quietly. Coldly.

Purpled sighed. "No," he said finally, which made Tommy pause, because Purpled's admittance of wrongdoing was few and far between. He could probably count the number of

times Purpled had straight-up admitted he was wrong instead of ignoring it or stubbornly insisting he was right on one hand and still have fingers left over. "It should not have."

"He told me that they were cremated," Tommy said, softer. "And that you have the urns."

Purpled smiled tightly. "I do," he said. Tommy held out a hand and hauled him to his feet. Purpled tightened his hold on his hand when Tommy tried to release his forearm, placing his other hand on Tommy's shoulder. "I *am* sorry, Tommy. It slipped my mind."

"It *slipped your mind*," Drista spat out.

There was no harshness in Purpled's tone as he turned towards the previously blonde-haired girl. "I wish it hadn't," he said, genuinely. "I came down from the bridge and ran for the cafeteria, where I arrived in time to see the Starborne—" a cross expression flashed across his face, and Tommy was mildly confused as to why. "—have an interesting discussion with the Egg before wiping it from existence." He glanced at Toast, whose expression remained neutral. "I still don't understand how they did that."

"I don't understand how they knew what was going to happen and warned us days before it actually *did*," Toast told him, crossing his arms.

"Fuck destiny," Purpled muttered under his breath, and then started slightly, like he hadn't wanted to say that. Tommy had no idea what he even meant by that statement. "They saved my life, Tommy," he said, and then snorted, irony tinging his words. "Who would've thought, eh?"

Tommy blew out a breath, the anger leaving him like a trickle of water through a broken glass. "Loyalty is a strange thing," he said eventually.

Purpled gave him a sharp look. "A strange thing indeed," he said finally. "As is love."

The parting of the five teenagers from the *L'manburg* to the *Mira* was not a group of tearful goodbyes as one might've thought. In fact, with only Kristin there in the pitifully empty docking bay, it wasn't much of a goodbye at all.

Tommy, of course, gave her a hug, and neither of them mentioned the oppressive air that hung around them that both of them did not want to touch. Specifically about the other members of their family, which was all but hanging together like the last bits of spiderwebs in autumn.

Kristin only smiled, ruffling Tommy's hair enough that he grumbled and batted her hand away, a warm feeling rising up in his chest. "Good luck," was all she said. No warning, no begging them to come back—she knew that there was no changing his decision, then.

Tommy glanced over his shoulder, looking at where Purpled was leaning against the entryway of the transport ship, stepping aside slightly when Drista dragged one of her boxes too close to his feet. The magenta-eyed boy stared at him for a second, and then turned and cursed Drista out when she *actually* dropped the box on one of his toes. Tommy snickered slightly before he turned back to Kristin, who had a fond smile on her face, having followed Tommy's look to the shenanigans of the other teens.

"Kristin," he said, and then tilted his head. "Mom." Kristin started slightly, jumping almost comically, and Tommy might've laughed, but the moment was too delicate for a laugh, and so he bit his tongue and tampered down on it. "I don't really want to go. I want to stay." He hesitated slightly. "I—I *wish* I could. I wish that would end well."

"Oh, sweetheart," Kristin whispered, blinking back tears—perhaps from what he'd called her, or perhaps from his quiet confession. "I understand." Tommy frowned at her, and she shook her head. "No, really, I do. I get it. I get that my husband and sons hurt you—" He opened his mouth to argue and Kristin shushed him quickly before continuing. "Even if it wasn't on purpose, Tommy, they did hurt you."

Well, he couldn't quite deny that.

"I get why you have to leave," Kristin continued with a small, sad smile. "I don't have to like it to understand."

Tommy sniffed, blinking back tears. Damn, it was dusty in here. He kicked his boots against the perfectly clean, not-at-all dusty floors. Someone should come sweep or something. "Maybe you should tell Wilbur that," he muttered, and then blinked rapidly. "I didn't mean it like that."

Kristin smirked slightly, and Tommy thought he saw a bit of Technoblade's crooked grin written in that smile, though that would be ridiculous. "He's a bit like a bull, isn't he?" she said wryly, and Tommy snickered at the image that filled his head. "You wave one red flag in front of his face and he comes charging at you without a thought of, *hmm, maybe this isn't such a good idea.*"

"Actually, bulls are colorblind," Tubbo said, startling Tommy so much that he almost—*almost*—reached for his knife. He didn't reach for his knife, and nobody saw his fingers twitch either, so he thought that was a win in his books. Tommy turned around to see Tubbo standing there, holding a box that was almost bigger than him and definitely had glass in it, from the clattering sound that it was making. Tubbo hefted the box more onto his elbow than his wrist, huffing slightly as he turned to face Kristin. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he admitted after a moment of silence. "Something about Wilbur being bullheaded, which I gotta agree on. But anyway, bulls are colorblind, and can't see the color red. They get mad at the movement of the fabric, not the color."

Tommy arched an eyebrow at him, amusement spreading through his chest. Classic Tubbo moment, right there.

"Just thought you should know," Tubbo said lamely, and then walked off, nearly dropping the box full of glass four times in the process, as he could just barely see over the rim.

Kristin let out a small sigh, nudging Tommy's shoulder. "I'm sure you five will be fine," she said kindly. "The *Mira* has some of the best crewmates in the Galactic Rebellion."

"Doesn't change the fact that it's a warship," Tommy said nervously.

"No," Kristin agreed. "It doesn't. But we're *all* at war, now, and besides—it's not like the *L'manburg* was any safer." She grimaced. "It should've been, in theory, but, well... you can't change the truth."

"I wish it wasn't the truth," he admitted.

"Of course you do," Kristin said, but there was no bitterness in her tone as she smiled. "Don't blame yourself either, Tommy. None of this was your fault."

She was shorter than Tommy, and so when she kissed him on the cheek, she had to go up on the tips of her boots to do so. Tommy blinked, surprised when she stepped away.

"Goodbye, Tommy," she said finally, when all he did was gape at her like a fish on land.

"It's not a goodbye," he found himself saying. "It's a see you later."

(This time he was sure of that.)

Kristin nodded firmly. "Make it so," was all she said.

And as he stepped into the transport, he realized that Clara Innes might've liked Kristin Minecraft, for they were both mothers, in the end.

Tommy shook Hafu's hand firmly when she met him, hours later in one of the *Mira's* many break rooms. He smiled politely as she grinned up at him—she was taller than Lani, but shorter than Tubbo, due to her Shulker status—a sort of mischievous glint in her eyes. "Pleasure to meet you, Lieutenant," he said genuinely, because he'd never had any reason to dislike her.

Technically, he'd met her before—in passing—but it had been nothing more than basic pleasantries. Or maybe he'd poked fun at her for being the helmsman. He couldn't quite remember—it had been after the events of Icarus-45HB, after all, and he only vaguely remembered hanging out with Drista and Lani as the former pelted foam balls at him and the latter laughed at their antics. They definitely hadn't said anything interesting.

"I hear you're to be my apprentice?" she said, the corners of her lips curving up slightly.

Tommy paused slightly. "Yes," he said, after a moment, and Drista, who was sitting across from him on a loveseat, lowered her datapad to stare at him.

"Wonderful," Hafu said. "Come with me. I'll show you around my station."

Tommy followed her, waving goodbye to Drista, because he didn't really have anything better to do. Despite her shorter stature, Hafu set quite a brisk pace through the corridors, causing Tommy to have to adjust from his normal speed that he'd used whenever he'd walked with Tubbo or Lani. He grimaced slightly as his boots slid at the wrong angle—damn, he really hated breaking in new shoes, but unfortunately, the uniform of the *Mira*, what with it being a small cruiser, had slightly different livery than that of the *L'manburg*. For one, the default uniforms of an Ensign, like the five of them had been given, albeit with different colored slashes designating divisions, had thin bracers, made of a type of durable metal that Tommy had zoned Tubbo out when he'd started gushing over, as well as a hard plastic-metal-type chest piece that went over his ribs in an arc that crossed his collarbones, and chausses made from the same material as his bracers.

Secondly, the shoes were not made of pleather. Tommy had no clue what it was—he wasn't an expert by any means—but Tubbo had said something about poly-ether polyurethane midsoles, and then he'd stopped listening.

His uniform, like his old one, was black and red—red being for the position of a deck officer; however junior his appointment was—however, along with the slight armor that the new clothes offered, it also had a variety of pockets that Rae had explained to each of them seriously.

There was a holster, which contained a phaser—and every single officer aboard the *Mira* had one, though whether they carried it with them on a daily basis was up to them. One thing that *was* required was a knife—and Tommy had the second one Purple had given him, which Rae had given back. Drista had wordlessly taken Dream's knife at Rae's silent offer, scowling heavily as she'd strapped it to the side of her thigh, and not a single person dared say anything less she snap.

There was also a variety of other gadgets and *things*—a datapad, which each of them had been assigned, complete with the insignia of the *Mira*. Fortunately, their old accounts could easily be transferred, so while Tommy hadn't actually messaged any of his old crewmates—nor had they messaged him—he knew very well that he could. There was also a communicator, far more advanced than the *L'manburg* had ever had, attached to the collar of their uniforms.

War, it seemed, was a good way to advance technology.

The beta shift was in full motion as Hafu took him to the bridge, and so there were three people currently there—Pokimane, the navigator, whom he'd seen many times on the tabloids, and seemed to be currently doing some complicated math as she switched between holographic equations and star charts; and Fi'hye'vep, the Chief Tactical Officer, who had been standing in as the head transport engineer, gave him a cheery wave from over by the control station. Tommy wondered how many bombs the Elytrian could set off at a push of a button. Certainly more than the *L'manburg* could ever dream of carrying. The third one on beta shift was Sykkuno, the only one Tommy had known for sure was here due to their mental bond. Sykkuno looked up from his datapad when Hafu and Tommy exited the lift, and he gave them a small smile.

Hafu went directly to her station, sat down heavily in her chair, and changed the Reversible Octopus™ on her station from angry to happy as she propped her legs on one of the screens. Tommy wondered if she was changing their course at all, but severely doubted it. "Have you watched Star Wars?" she asked suddenly.

Tommy blinked at her from where he'd been silently examining the superior technology, as well as eyeing her yellow and purple octopus. "What?"

"Star Wars," Hafu said, waving a hand widely. "You know, the widely popular twelve-movie franchise made in Terra's twenty-first century?" Over in the corner, Fi'hye'vep jerked his head up like he'd been stung.

"Yeah," he said slowly, wondering if this was a trick question. "I've seen Star Wars."

He'd seen the first six, that was. Lani, who had orchestrated the whole thing, hadn't let him watch the final six, claiming that they ruined everything or some shit. Tubbo had spent the entire time loudly proclaiming every single detail of what they got wrong until Drista had threatened to shave his head.

"Well, then, my young apprentice," Hafu said, removing her feet from the desk and p back so that her chair moved backward. She powered up her station with a retinal and finger scan, her fingers flying near effortlessly across the holographic keyboard. **WELCOME, HAFU** flashed across the screen in bright yellow, bolded letters. Hafu spun around and grinned up at him. "This is where the fun begins."

Chapter End Notes

\$5 says that some of you forgot about Mellohi and Ca'jat. I didn't. I knew this moment would come.

For those of you thinking, "oh his reaction isn't as tearful as I thought it would be" well, Tommy has been through a lot of shit. And he's going to continue to go through shit, and get more and more numb to death, because I am positively evil.

women can kick my ass

"Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow."

— Mary Anne Radmacher

Tommy walked into the room that the *Mira's* A.I. had directed him to—he was called Bimbus, apparently, and of *course* Sykkuno had named him, and Toast had never had the heart to change it after the Avians were presumed dead.

When Captain Toast had told the five of them that they needed 'mandated, mandatory therapy,' Tommy had been expecting a cushy room like Bad's office and a counselor with a clipboard. He had expected to spend the next three hours insanely uncomfortable and eager to leave.

Instead of whatever picture he had mentally thought up, he got a medium-sized room painted with dark grey on the walls, a concrete floor with a red chalk circle on the ground that was roughly ten feet in radius, and about ten beanbags in varying sizes and colors spread around outside it. There was a bunch of climbing ropes in one corner connected to a beam—he assumed it was to practice climbing up ropes.

Tommy stopped in the doorway, glancing around at the bright LED lamps that adorned the walls, clearly lighting up what seemed to be a fighting ring in beams of white light. "What the fuck...?" he muttered.

"Move," Purpled said from behind him, and Tommy, startled but not scared, shifted out of the doorway, stepping further into the room so that Purpled, who was dressed in the new sleek

but slightly armored uniform. Purpled's eyes went up to Tommy's head, his face expressionless. "I see Valkyrae got to your hair."

"I did."

Tommy shrieked like a small, tiny child, and Purpled had his gun out in a second, pointed up at the corner of the ceiling where Valkyrae was squatting on a beam, her hair pulled into a braid that coiled over her shoulder. Her eyes glittered with silent mirth as Purpled swore under his breath and holstered his phaser, perhaps a bit harder than necessary.

He did not like surprises.

Rae dropped off the edge of the beam, which was a good twenty feet from the floor, grabbing onto one of the ropes to slow her fall slightly so she could land on the balls of her feet instead of absorbing the energy of the fall with a roll. Tommy winced, thinking about the rope burn—it was real rope, after all, or however real rope could be—but Rae must've heard his questioning thoughts through their bond or seen his eyes, because she plodded over them, holding up her hands for examination. Her hands weren't even red.

"Calluses," she explained.

Purpled raises an eyebrow. "Do you climb ropes often?"

"When I was stuck on Icarus, I free-climbed hundreds of feet," she replied evenly. "Sykkuno did a little bit, but I found it fun."

"Of course," Purpled said, his voice flat, but not mean. "You wouldn't die if you fell." Tommy glanced at him, but there was no derision in his tone, and no jealous curl of his lips. It was a simple statement.

"Correct," Rae said, clearly reading his tone as well, and then went up on her tip-toes to peer over Tommy and Purpled's shoulders. "Lani! Drista! Come on in!"

Tommy and Purpled shuffled to the side to make room for the two girls, the former of whom paused, confused, before she was nearly run over by Drista, whose eyes were glittering as she looked around the room like some sort of bird.

"This is *awesome*!" Drista cried out. "Like a private training room?"

"One of many," Rae said, smirking slightly. "One of the benefits of a warship instead of an explorer's ship."

Tubbo wandered in about thirty seconds later, looking exhausted. "Long night," he told Tommy, when Tommy opened his mouth to ask him why he had deep shadows under his eyes.

"Nightmares?" Lani asked, frowning slightly.

"No," Tubbo said, and then tilted his head. "Well, yes. But that's not why I'm tired." He tugged on one of the yellow stripes on his shirt. "Lieutenant Tina gave me a coding problem to solve, and it's due by the end of today." He gritted his teeth, looking miserable. "I have so much left to do—I've barely touched the surface, and I only have ten hours of the day left."

"Breaks are important," Rae told him seriously.

Tubbo blinked at her, and then glanced around the room, like he'd just realized where he was. "Is this Fight Club?"

Tommy leaned closer to Purpled when Drista and Lani snorted. "I don't get that reference."

"There is no fight club," Purpled replied, and Tommy was still confused, but clearly the magenta-eyed boy wasn't going to elaborate further.

"Not to be a buzzkill," Tubbo continued. "But I thought this was therapy."

Rae tilted her head slowly, her lips pursed in amusement. "What led you to that conclusion?"

"The missive talked about building mental confidence with a trained professional in order to better cope and deal with frustration, anger, and poor decision making," Tubbo recited, as if from memory. He had a pretty good memory, so it probably *was* memorized.

Drista snapped her fingers. "Therapy boxing!" she said, sounding far too excited.

Rae grinned, though it was more animalistic than anything. "Precisely," she said, dodging the five of them in order to walk over to the red-chalked ring. The lights glared down at her like some sort of late-night show, and Rae spread her arms wide, looking particularly dangerous under the harsh beams. "Welcome to therapy." She made direct eye contact with Purpled, who, to his credit, did not flinch. "Or, as I like to call it—an excuse to beat people up in order to deal with my issues." She tilted her head. "Except this time, *I* won't. I'll be teaching *you* how to fight."

Drista shifted on the balls of her feet. "I thought fighting was about remaining calm," she said, her voice genuinely confused. "If you fight when you're angry, you're going to mess up faster and get carried away by emotional responses."

"It's a way to *release* your anger," Rae corrected. "You don't have to be a mindless, rage-filled monster, but you don't have to be an emotionless robot either." She shook her head. "In fact, you shouldn't be. This is hand-to-hand combat—and it's one of six skills that, in two months' time, you will need to pass in front of a panel of judges for them to deem you fit to serve aboard a warship."

There was a moment of silence.

"None of you read the contract, did you."

It wasn't really a question.

"I read it," Purpled said. Of course he had. "I know it by heart."

Rae eyed him, her gaze calculating. "Bit of a control freak there, aren't you?" Tommy winced at her blatancy, but then again, Purpled was all about being brutally honest, so it was about time he had a taste of his own medicine.

Purpled raised his chin. "Yes," he said simply.

"Great. Toast is too. You'll be good friends. You're first." Rae stepped side, gesturing wildly. "Put your weapons down. All three of them."

Purpled paused from where he'd been unbuckling his holster. "How do you know I have three?"

"I'm the Chief Security Officer," Rae said wryly. "It's my job to know things like that." She stepped toward him and grabbed his wrist—gently, but also forcefully, turning his forearm up. "Your middle fingers betray you," she said, tapping the center of his palm. "It reveals you have a knife strapped to your arm." Purpled sucked in a short breath and used his other hand to roll his sleeve up, revealing—yes, a short tactical knife. Rae smiled at him, and then used her foot to kick at one of his shoes. "You are right-handed, and you keep your left foot slightly forward, revealing you have a knife in your boot. Take your shoes off. We won't need it in the ring."

Purpled raised his eyebrows at her, and then did as he was told without complaint. Which was new.

Lani plopped down on one of the beaten-up beanbags, a frown marring her face as she tied her hair into two pigtails. "I don't get it," she said. "I'm a medical officer. Why would I need to pass a self-defense test thingy?"

"You were also a medical officer when Lieutenant Nihachu attacked you in your own ship," Rae said flatly, and Lani's eyes widened briefly, her arms curling around her own chest. Drista looked like she wanted to say something, but Tubbo elbowed her, and the Human girl fell silent. Rae turned to face Lani fully. "That was mean," she admitted, but— "Life is mean. You serve aboard a warship now, Lani Underscore. Not an exploratory vessel. We go to *war*. After today's briefing, you go on a mission in a week and a half—"

"We do?" Tommy asked under his breath.

Drista leaned in close. "You really need to read your messages instead of having Purpled tell you everything."

Tommy scowled at her.

Rae ignored them. "—and sure, it's low-hazard, but who knows—you might just need to know how to punch someone." She turned back to Purpled, who had stripped down to his undersuit and was facing her. "Which reminds me. Make a fist."

Purpled blinked at her, and then fell back onto the balls of his heels, bringing up his fists in front of him. Rae paced over to him and checked his stance and then his hands, stepping back. "Good. At least you know that."

"I know that I'm right because Captain Toast taught Tommy how to make a fist verbally after he punched me in the face incorrectly," Purpled said flatly, and Drista snickered under her breath. Tommy winced.

"First-hand experience, then," Rae said wryly. "Now try to hit me."

Purpled paused. "You're not going to teach me how to fight?"

Rae shook her head. "There is no one way how to fight. Some people fight with strength. Some people fight with dexterity. Some people can do flips. Some people like going for the

weak points of a body—it doesn't matter *how* you fight; only that you do it in a way that is quick, efficient, and won't bring harm to your body in a way that can be prevented."

Amusement-euphoria-anticipation flickered down the bond between him and Rae, and Tommy raised his eyebrows in surprise, because she usually had an iron grasp on that thing. Which meant she was planning something.

Confusion-puzzlement-concern leaked through from Sykkuno—through Rae to Tommy—and Rae pushed back a feeling of *joy-cheerfulness-optimism*, which caused Sykkuno's side of the bond to go silent again.

"Hit me," Rae said again, and Tommy looked over to see that Tubbo had his tablet out and was definitely filming this, Drista snickering loudly, and Lani looking like she wished she was back in the medbay because someone was definitely going to get hurt.

Purpled moved first, which was probably his first mistake, throwing what Tommy considered a reasonably good punch—except Rae saw it coming, ducked down under it, and punched Purpled directly where one of his weak points was.

Tommy and Tubbo, being males with near-identical body parts, winced in unison, and Tommy grimaced, a flash of mirrored pain running down his lower body. Purpled sank to the ground in comedic fashion, tears streaking their way down his cheeks, and a low groan escaping from his fashion.

Drista fell over, laughing so hard that no sound came out from between her lips, and Lani pressed two shocked hands over her mouth, looking like she wanted to laugh as well or maybe get Purpled some medical help.

Rae stood over Purpled, staring down at him with her arms crossed. "Lesson one," she said flatly, though not unkindly. "There are no rules. Your enemies will not follow them, and so neither will I."

Purpled rolled over onto his side so he was facing the other four children. "Delete that," he growled at Tubbo, who fell off the beanbag he'd been lying on and started howling with

laughter.

Rae glanced at the two idiots that were lying on the concrete ground. "I wouldn't laugh," she said seriously. "You two are next."

They sobered up pretty quickly after that.

Tubbo was worse than Purpled, but then he cheated halfway through the first six seconds and brought out a knife from his fourth-dimensional space. Drista looked up sharply, and Purpled raised a mild eyebrow of surprise from where they were sitting on the beanbags, but Rae didn't stop the fight, only pivoted halfway through her move to grab his wrist and twist it enough that he let out a yell and dropped it into her waiting left hand.

She brought it up to his neck, he froze, and then the fight was over.

Rae stepped back, her eyes calculating as she looked down at the small blade. "Don't give your enemies weapons if you can't keep them," she chastised. "Better that you be subdued than bring out a knife and have *me* use it on your teammates."

Tubbo rubbed his neck sheepishly, a bead of sweat rolling down the side of his sweaty face. "Sorry," he muttered.

Rae looked at him sharply. "What are you sorry for?"

Tubbo blinked at her, and Lani looked up from where she'd been sorting through some gibberish paperwork that Tommy assumed the medical officers gave the poor new ensigns because they didn't want to do that. He could *not* relate. Helmsmen didn't do a lot of paperwork, mostly because their job was *fly and don't crash the fucking ship*. Now, if he crashed the ship, then there *would* be paperwork, but that was fine because he could just make Purpled do it.

"I... cheated," Tubbo said finally.

"There *are* no rules," Rae said firmly, and Purpled muttered some choice words under his breath until Tommy elbowed him in the side. Hard.

"You said no knives."

"No," Rae said, shaking her head, a small smile coming to her lips. "I said to leave your armor and its weapons outside of the ring. What you did with your *Torak-Khogari*—" Tubbo and Lani made identical noises of surprise. "—is something you will always have. I asked you to leave your weapons and armor behind because it is *not* something you will always have." Rae paused, holding out the knife, and Tubbo took it, the blade vanishing into his fourth-dimensional space, which apparently was called a *Torak-Khogari*. "I will not ask you to even yourselves out—that goes for any of you—" She glanced around the room. "—for *my* sake. I have fought many people, and you forget that I taught Hafu, a Shulker as well, how to fight."

"Okay," Tubbo said softly.

Rae hesitated. "Please don't bring bombs, though," she said with a smirk, and Tubbo gave her a weak smile. "Brooke will kill me if I allowed explosives to hurt people I am trying to teach. Save your explosions for another time."

Tubbo blinked at her. "But they're therapeutic."

Rae grimaced. "Not for me." She doesn't elaborate, but Tubbo nodded, cutting a glance towards his sister, who shrugged her shoulders. "Use whatever measures you have to try to take me down, as long as they won't hurt me for long periods. Like explosives." She looked at Lani. "And the cyanide hyposprays. I'm good, but not *that* good."

Tommy snorted, and Lani grinned.

"A lesson to all you non-Shulkers," Rae said, addressing them—Purpled, Drista, and Tommy, that was. "Their most dangerous things are their hands because of the *Torak-Khogari*—the

fourth-dimensional space they have to store items that only drop on their whims and thirty minutes after their death." She held out a hand, beckoning Tubbo closer, and he stepped forward. Rae used one of her hands to wrap around his wrists and clasp them together. "Summon something," she told him, eyes glittering. "Preferably one that's not sharp."

Tubbo blinked at her, and then a yellow ball appeared clasped between his hands, and Drista let out a snort of amusement, and Tommy colored—that was one of the foam balls Drista had fired at him repeatedly in an attempt to get him to be able to stop them midair. It had worked eventually, but not fast enough.

"Why do you have one of those?" he groaned.

"Remembrance," Tubbo said, and then Rae slid her hands between his and grabbed the ball, smiling at him before tossing it back.

"Now pull out your knife again," she said, and Tubbo frowned at her. "Don't worry, this is the basics I went through with Hafu. You won't hurt me."

Tubbo pulled out his knife. Rae went through the same motion she had, but faster, the knife out of his hands and against his throat as easily as a breath. Tommy raised his eyebrows in surprise, and Purpled gave a thoughtful hum.

"You can *use* it," Rae told him as she stepped away and handed the knife back, and Tubbo took it, rubbing his throat ruefully. "But you cannot *rely* on it. There is a difference. You must learn to use your feet too." She tapped his forehead. "And your brain. If you begin to rely on it solely then you can be predicted. And if there is one thing you do *not* want to be, as a soldier, it is predictable. That's how people die."

"Do not be afraid," Drista murmured as if to herself, like some long-forgotten lesson.

Rae looked at her sharply. "No," she said.

Drista jerked her head up from where her gaze had been lingering on the ground. "What?"

"No," Rae said again. "To fear is to be alive. To fear is to be *Human*. Avian. Shulker." She gestured between the six of them. "To eradicate that fear is to rid yourself of your humanity."

"But if I'm afraid, doesn't that just make me a coward?" Drista asked slowly.

Rae's eyes flashed. "I don't know who taught you that, but they are wrong. To fear, and to stand not because, but *despite*, is what defines you. I would say that we will all have our defining moment in life, but you all already have." Her gaze is forlorn, then.

"But I ran into that cave," Purpled said, sounding vulnerable—more vulnerable than Tommy had heard in a long, long while. "I ran and I hid, and other kids died."

There was a thick, palpable silence.

To her credit, Rae didn't try to brush it off. "Why did you run?"

"Because Tommy told me I was going to die," Purpled replied. "And I believed him, because he is my friend."

"You would have," Tommy pointed out amidst the silence. "Your name was not on the list, but you would have died because you got sick, and Chroma did not believe in anything but the epitome of health." His stomach clenched at the thought—he had stood at the executions, and he had watched, unable to do anything. He had been there as sisters lost brothers and friends lost companions and lovers lost each other, hands clasped underneath an oak tree—he had been there in the beginning, and he had stood through the middle, and he had watched at the end. He could not imagine what he would have done if one of the bodies that he had carried to the graves had been Purpled.

"Wait," Tubbo said slowly, turning to Purpled. "I thought you said your name *was* on the list."

"He told me it was," Purpled said flatly, gesturing to Tommy. "Only, it was really just Grian, Alyssa, and Ranboo, of course." He laughed harshly. "Had we stayed—Foolish and I—we probably would have died, yes. There would never have been a Children's Rebellion. There would be no us, and certainly no legacy." He had always been the one to state the facts like it was, no matter how much—or who—it hurt.

"So you ran because you were afraid you were going to die," Rae said slowly, and then turned to Drista. "Does that make him a coward?"

Drista stared at her, slightly slack-jawed. "I—him? Purpled—no. He's not a coward."

"And if someone else had done it?" Rae asked patiently. "Not your friend. Some random kid. If they had ran because they were going to die—would that make them a coward?"

"I called it a tactical retreat," Purpled said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. Tommy snorted.

"It is not cowardice to be afraid for your life," Rae said kindly, to them all. "It *is* cowardly to feel that fear and remain silent. There comes a time when silence could be considered betrayal. Anyone can say *I love you*." She smiled, real and broad and true. "It takes a courageous person to stand for that love. It takes a braver person to fight for it. And it takes heroes to die for it."

Tommy thought of three people kneeling on a stage—a Feline, a Phantom, and an Elytrian. He thought of three hands in the air, and a symbol of hope and desperation that would eventually lead to rebellion and demise. He thought of blood under his boots, mixing with the dirt to become a slushy sort of mud, and he thought of a blood-red sunset that had once meant the ending of a day and now meant the end of a thousand people who could have been more.

"They say not to fear, in the lessons given by liars, and the stories that are merely fantasy," Rae said, and Drista opened her mouth to argue before Lani reached over and grabbed her wrist, shutting her up. "They say that the best sort of *heroes*—" she spat the word like it was taboo. "—are the fearless ones. The ones that aren't afraid of anything. But that's not true. To fight is to feel that fear and then stand your ground anyway—to stand not *because*, but

despite." Her eyes twinkled as she referenced her older words. "To fight is to accept that fear and understand that we are all only mortal."

"The spymasters told us to rid ourselves of emotion during battle and missions," Drista said, licking her lips, and shifting nervously on the balls of her feet, like giving away this information will make her drop dead. She played with a strand of her now-dark hair before continuing. "Anger, among other things, is not acceptable."

Rae considered those words before she continued. "And yet, to be a spy is to face a life of constant betrayal. To be forced to watch your back at every move. To walk among enemies and love them as they love you. Understand that." Rae shook her head. "I am not teaching you to be a spy. I am teaching you how to be a *soldier*."

"We're members of a crew, though," Tommy said slowly. "We're more likely to die in a space battle if the *Mira* blows up, or tortured to death by an enemy crew, than on a battlefield." Lani winced at that notion, and Purpled made a face.

Rae leveled him with a look. "I am teaching you to be a soldier so you know that you are capable of *being* one, not so that you actually are one," she said. "I am teaching you to have confidence in your abilities, as different as they vary. Fighting—" Here her lip curled. "—that is the least of your lessons, despite being the first." She spun around, widening her stance, and Tubbo, who was still in the ring, watched her warily. "There are many more things to learn than who can strike first and who can strike last. It is a dance."

Purpled stared at her for a moment. "Are you sure you shouldn't be a communications officer?" he asked. "You certainly have a way with words." There was a measure of respect there, that was rarely, if ever, in Purpled's voice at all.

Rae laughed. "Mother used to tell me I should be a politician," she admitted. "But fighting is a language too. Who says I can't do both?" She turned and beckoned to Tommy. "Come. Come dance."

He knew he was going to regret this.

Tommy groaned as he leaned back in the chair, the bruises from earlier that day he'd earned from losing *spectacularly* to Rae making themselves known. Even using Drista's technique of feeling the air, or whatever they'd decided to call it, in an attempt to gauge Rae's movement, had come to naught.

"I fight Sykkuno," Rae had pointed out when she'd discovered what he'd been trying to do. *"He's an Avian too. Would be a little sad if I couldn't fight against my own kind, no?"*

Tommy had squinted at up at her. *"Wait, feeling the air is possible?"*

Rae had stared at him for a moment. *"It's called aklymesh. This translates to 'feeling the wind.' But it doesn't mean you can move the wind, which is why your ball trick keeps failing."*

Tommy didn't bother to tell her that he'd eventually succeeded in his 'ball trick', even if it was on break for now.

Purpled肘ed him from his seat next to him as eup began to talk next to his PowerPoint presentation. It wasn't actually a PowerPoint presentation—it was slightly more advanced than *that*, with holographic pictures and touch-friendly blueprints, but whatever. It was a *glorified* PowerPoint presentation.

"Your mission is simple," eup told the five children sitting around the table—as well as the four adults listening; Toast, Rae, Sykkuno, and Corpse. "Retrieve the data drive."

"Simple, he says," Tubbo muttered, squinting up at the string of information littering the screen, half of which Tommy could barely understand.

"Simple, yes," eup said, the corners of his eyes crinkling up. "But not easy."

a new hand touches the beacon

"Every new friend is a new adventure...

the start of more memories."

- Patrick Lindsay

"This data drive contains the crew information of three ships," eup said, and something about his tone made Tommy sit up straight, although he knew he wasn't in trouble. eup swiped at the hologram until a small drive—no larger than half the palm of his hand, surely—appeared, slowly rotating in a circle for the occupants of the room to see, which included the rest of the Traumatized Teens™, the entirety of the Amigops—which was the absolute dumbest group name in the *history* of names; and Tommy would know, because some dumbass historians had decided to call *his rebellion* the Children's Rebellion, which was like calling Pogtopia the Children's School.

Redundant.

"More specifically," eup continued, after a notable silence as everyone studied the hologram. "The crew's familial history, names, and *addresses*."

Purpled hissed under his breath. "How did that get *leaked*?" he muttered.

"They're not military-class vessels, or even explorer-class, like the *L'manburg*," Toast cut in. "They're not as encrypted as our information. I wouldn't say it's *easy* to hack their data, but it's *easier*."

"No, it is easy. You guys need better firewalls," Tubbo said flippantly. "I could hack the Pentagon of the Galactic Rebellion when I was, like, ten."

Toast looked at him. "*We* need better firewalls," he corrected. "And yes, *you* could. That's why you were recruited." A slightly frustrated look crossed his face before it vanished, but Tommy didn't think it was quite directed *at* Tubbo.

εup waited for another moment before continuing. "You all are smart individuals, so I'm assuming you can guess why the leaking of personal information might be a problem," he said. "But it's my duty to state the obvious, so here's the obvious: the families of the crew are going to get targeted." Tommy winced slightly. "The three ships are the *Hiraeth*, the *Syzygy* —"

"That's a real word?" Drista muttered under her breath.

"—and the *Azalea*."

"It's not," Purpled said flatly.

Drista looked at him, crossing her arms across her chest. "It's not a real word? Why'd they name a ship that?"

"Like the *L'manburg* is a real word," Tommy snorted.

"Syzygy *is* a real word," Tubbo spoke up. "It's when three celestial objects are lined up." He slashed his hand through the air meaningfully.

Purpled coughed pointedly. "No," he said. "I meant that Anastasia Zarill's ship is not named the *Azalea*. Not anymore."

εup stared at him for a moment. "The archives—"

"Are nearly four years out of date," Purpled said. He twirled his finger meaningfully. "Pull up the ship's manifest again. Reload it."

εup frowned, but the hologram switched from the picture of the drive to a scrolling document with a lot of words and subsections that made Tommy's brain dizzy trying to read it. The words at the top said the *Azalea*, whose captain was a Human woman named Anastasia Zarill, and her first officer an Elytrian female named Iny'essy'i Caly'io'pe. εup dutifully hit the *re-scan* button, and the pictures changed—Anastasia got older, and had a scar over her eye, and Iny'essy'i now had short hair tied back in popular Elytrian fashion.

The words *Azalea* changed to *Harley-Azaya*.

Rae let out a surprised hum, and Corpse murmured something under his breath to Sykkuno, who tilted his head up to listen. εup blinked, and looked at Purpled. "You know the ship."

Toast didn't look surprised, but Tommy thought that Toast knew, like, *everything*, so that didn't really count.

"I have met Captain Anastasia and Commander Iny'essy'i, yes," Purpled said, crossing his arms. "She requested a meeting with me roughly five months after Ranboo and I were rescued from the Red Planet." His expression shuttered slightly before he schooled himself into neutrality, but Tommy knew him better than that. "With a request."

"I approved that request, after asking Purpled," Toast cut in with a nod. "She wanted to know if it would be inappropriate to name her ship the *Harley-Azaya*, and was inclined to ask the only person—that we knew of—" his gaze flickered to Tommy. "—who did not have complete memory loss of the event."

"Not that I was there for much of it," Purpled muttered, and Tommy reached over and placed a hand on his shoulder. Purpled glared at him, but there was no real heat behind it as he shrugged Tommy's grip off.

"Why would she care about Purpled's opinion of a ship name?" Drista asked, blinking rapidly.

"Because she and her wife named the ship after two of the three thousand, two hundred, and seventy-three children that were once on Pogtopia," Purpled said flatly, though a tremor rose and fell in his voice. "Specifically, A'zy'ary'ia 'Azaya' Ply'thy'e and Harley-Davis Kantor."

"Like the motorcycle company?" Rae muttered under her breath, and Corpse reached out and pinched her side. She scowled at him irritably.

"Why would she do that?" Tommy asked, feeling a lump in his throat.

"Because of the letters that were recovered from Pogtopia's ashes," Purpled said, inclining his head slightly. "I have mentioned them to you before. Harley and Azaya sent written letters—notes, really—to each other and fell in love, and they were shot and killed not *during* the executions, but before it."

Tommy looked at him. "Those were the two under the oak tree," he said. "I remember hearing about it from the guards."

"The *Harley-Azaya* runs missions for child slavery rings," Purpled said, clasping his hands together on his knee. "Captain Anastasia thought it was noteworthy to rename her ship after two kids who died for their love, and requested my presence in order to discern whether it would be inappropriate." Purpled shrugged a shoulder. "I gave my approval, even though you and I never knew them, and never even talked to them."

"Why?" Tommy asked quietly.

Purpled met his gaze with his unsettling magenta eyes. "Because more of the kids deserve to be remembered than just us," he said finally. "Than you and I, the only ones left. Than even Ranboo." Tubbo winced, and Lani reached over and placed a steadying hand on his forearm. "Then the members of the Children's Rebellion who died on that stage. We are the notable ones, but their names deserve to be said across the galaxy." A twitch of a smile crossed his face. "We were the lucky ones—or, perhaps, the unlucky ones, depending on your point of

view—but we were never the *only* ones there." The smile is replaced by a hard look. "Those bastards just made it personal."

Tommy stepped aside to let Drista brush by him, the Human girl neglecting to throw him more than a curious, cursory glance before she all but stomped away down the hall.

"Drista—" he started, but she turned a corner and vanished.

Tommy strolled into the room she'd come out of in a huff, which was the same room that he'd agreed to meet Rae in at 1630. She was picking up a pair of boxing gloves from where they'd been clearly dumped on the floor, a size bigger than her own hands—Drista's, then. "What's with her?" he asked pleasantly.

Rae looked up as she set the gloves on one of the various racks lining the walls. She sighed and leaned against the wall. "It is difficult," she said eventually. "You and I are Avians, of course. We have dealt with the finality that we are the end of our full-blooded race in less than three decades."

Tommy swallowed. "Right."

"For Drista," Rae started, and then paused. "Drista," she said again. "Grew up in a galaxy that is, statistically, twenty-six point six percent Human. She has always struggled with individuality. Despite the Humans being in the higher percentage, you know how some of the other origins treat them—like they're *normal*, and everyone else is enhanced."

"I told her that wasn't true," Tommy said, his lips feeling dry. "Back on Icarus, I mean."

Rae rolled her eyes. "And I'm sure every time one person told you something once that it stuck and you never thought about it again."

Fair point.

"Toast thought the same as her, many, many years ago," Rae said quietly. "Back when we were still at the Galactic Rebellion Academy of Space Exploration and Protection."

Tommy gaped at her. "*That's* Fleet School's full name?"

Rae smirked, amused. "It *is* easier to call it Fleet School or the Academy. Anyway, Toast thought he was...lesser—not that he would ever admit it, of course—because he could not cause fruit to fall from trees. Avians were rare then, yes, but we were not *extinct*. We were on the same level as Shulkers. Far and few between. But Humans have many things that others do not."

"They can see further," Tommy said. "Than Shulkers."

"They can see further than every other origin save Elytrians and Avians, yes," Rae said. "They have a higher lung capacity than everyone *except* Elytrians. They can eat nearly everything—and even things they can't eat won't cause them to fall over and die, probably. Humans have very strong stomachs." She made a face. "Toast once ate eighteen different kinds of bark to find one that would make a good tea for Hafu's birthday present. He threw up seven of them, but managed not to get sick longer than a few days. It's truly a miracle that man is not dead." Tommy didn't say anything, keen on watching the nostalgia that was visible in Rae's distant eyes. "They will live longer—longer than most." *Longer than us*, she did not say, but Tommy saw it linger around both of them anyway. "Their race is split at a semi-even fifty-two percent born biologically female, forty-eight percent born biologically male." Tommy tilted his head at her, and the confusion must've been evident on her face, because she said, "I'm sure you know Kitsunes are about a one percent female chance, but, barring Avians, the average male-to-female split for origins is around thirty percent. It is far easier for Humans to conceive. And Humans work far better together—randomly grab six of them from anywhere and give them a task, and they will outperform any other randomized teams from other origins. Elytrians and Avians are very familial based, so they wouldn't even be *capable* of it." Her smile turned sad. "Well, Avians were. I don't even think there's six of us to grab, now."

"Why do you know all this?" he found himself asking.

Rae smiled. "Because there was a friend," she said. "There was a friend who needed to understand that just because we could do things *physically* better, that did not mean we *were* better."

Toast, Tommy thought blearily, and the mental image of the younger captain filled with unworthiness and self-loathing did not at all fit the picture of the Human that he looked up to currently. But Toast had grown up since then, he supposed—he had graduated from Fleet School when he was only seventeen, the second-youngest to graduate, though it *had* been the youngest in his time—achieved captaincy before his mid-twenties, and been the youngest Admiral ever given a position in the history of the Galactic Rebellion. Tubbo might've been the youngest to ever be a Lieutenant at the ripe age of fifteen-and-a-half, but if there was a prodigy every generation, Toast had been one in the generation before his, and was still achieving greatness.

"She does not understand that I get her more than she thinks," Rae said sadly, shaking her head. "Most do not. I had Toast as a friend." The Avian let out a sigh, pulling out her datapad. "I'll get Toast to talk to her. She looks up to him."

Tommy arched a brow. "Don't we all?" he drawled. "That man is like a grown-up Purpled, but with more power."

"More power and fewer attachment issues," Rae corrected, sounding slightly distracted as she typed out a message, fingers flying across the screen. "I think they would nearly be the exact same if Purpled didn't go through several traumatic events before he turned eighteen."

"What, psychopaths?" Tommy snorted.

Rae looked up at him sharply. "Who said that Purpled was a psychopath?"

Tommy winced. "Drista," he said, and a hard look crossed Rae's face. "But she was mad," he said, trying to save face. Or, rather, Drista's face. "I don't think she meant it."

"No," Rae said slowly. "Maybe she didn't. But I think it struck him even so. Maybe hit a little bit too close to home." She winced. "I think he's afraid."

"What?" Tommy asked, blinking rapidly. "Why?"

Rae smiled sadly. "Afraid of losing everything he loves," she said quietly. "Again." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I think that he's so afraid that he would go to the ends of the Universe to keep the people he cares about alive. I think he would do anything—even hurt the person or object of his care—in order to force them to *live*, no matter the consequences." She eyed Tommy. "Does that sound familiar?"

Tommy took a shuddering breath, and thought of a cool muzzle pressed against his forehead and a boy with hard magenta eyes and a threatening tone.

You shoot yourself, Tommy Innes, and I will follow you into the grave of your own creation.

"Yes," he said, his voice distant. "Yes, it does." He smiled a thin, sickly smile. "I have a history of disappointing people."

Rae tilted her head at him, her eyes warm. "I'm still waiting."

Profile

Timothy Luther

↳ Age

18 Standard Years

↳ Species

Human

↳ Grade

12

↳ Extracurriculars

Skyhopping

Schedule for Skyline Millenium (Skymill)'s Academy of Neutral Relations

Period 1 (0730-0820) Interspecies Ethics

Period 2 (0825 - 0915) Culinary Arts I

Period 3 (0920 - 1010) Calculus B.C.

Period 4 (1015 - 1105) Physics C. Mechanics

Period 5 (1110 - 1200) Debate & Diplomacy 101

LUNCH (1200 - 1230)

Period 6 (1235 - 1325) Team Sports

Period 7 (13:30 - 14:25) Ancient Philosophies

"Remember," Rae told him. "You want to be a professional speed racer when you grow up."

"I fucking what," he said flatly.

"*And* you have to dye your hair black," she continued. "You and Drista are posing as siblings."

"What."

Tubbo was laughing at him.

Profile

Parker Peterson

↳ Age

18 Standard Years

↳ Species

Human

↳ Grade

12

↳ Extracurriculars

Debate Team

Schedule for Skyline Millenium (Skymill)'s Academy of Neutral Relations

Period 1 (0730-0820) Interspecies Ethics

Period 2 (0825 - 0915) Anthropology

Period 3 (0920 - 1010) Forensic Psychology

Period 4 (1015 - 1105) Calculus A.B.

Period 5 (1110 - 1200) Debate & Diplomacy 101

LUNCH (1200 - 1230)

Period 6 (1235 - 1325) Lifetime Fitness

Period 7 (13:30 - 14:25) Ancient Philosophies

Tommy was holding back a laugh as he looked over at Purpled and saw the naked disgust written on his face. "*Parker Peterson?*" the boy demanded. "What kind of inane joke is that?"

"Hey," Sykkuno said, looking mildly hurt. "I like Spider-Man!"

"What a white name," Drista snickered.

"*You're* white too," Purpled told her flatly. He turned back to look at Toast, who was fighting back a smile. "Why do I have so much controversy shit?" He squinted at the datapad. "Philosophy, debate, ethics..."

"Because you want to be a politician when you grow up," Rae cut in, teeth blinding through her grin, and Tommy took the tablet out of Purpled's hands before it crumbled under his white-knuckled fingertips.

Rae was lucky Purpled respected her.

Profile

Tobias Steinfield

↳ Age

18 Standard Years

↳ Species

Human

↳ Grade

12

↳ Extracurriculars

Chess Club

Schedule for Skyline Millenium (Skymill)'s Academy of Neutral Relations

Period 1 (0730-0820) Stellar Cartography

Period 2 (0825 - 0915) Anthropology

Period 3 (0920 - 1010) Biochemistry

Period 4 (1015 - 1105) Calculus B.C

Period 5 (1110 - 1200) Xenolinguistics

LUNCH (1200 - 1230)

Period 6 (1235 - 1325) Team Sports

Period 7 (13:30 - 14:25) Culinary Arts I

Tubbo wasn't laughing anymore.

Lani was.

"Wow," the boy said, blinking in disbelief at his schedule, and also sounding like he'd swallowed a frog or something equally of amphibian ilk. "This is a lot of... work." He tilted his head. "Hmm. I never got to take Stellar Cartography or Temporal Mechanics at Fleet school. At least those should be interesting."

Drista peered over his shoulder. "Why do you have so many nerd classes?"

"Because he *is* a nerd," Rae cut in, and Tommy choked on air at the surprised look that crossed Tubbo's face. The Avian female grinned at the younger Shulker. "Congratulations," she said genuinely. "Our original plan was to make you a failing student, but we didn't think you could pull it off. So extremely sleep-deprived STEM student it is."

Tubbo pouted. "None of these are tactical related."

Toast cleared his throat and pulled out a pair of glasses from under his desk. Thick-rimmed, circular, black glasses. "You are not an operations officer," he said, only a little stern.

Tubbo blinked. "What? I thought I was—"

"At Skymill," Toast corrected himself, and Rae coughed into her fist. "You don't know anything about operations on spaceships. Is that clear?"

Tubbo hung his head. "Clear, sir."

Profile

Lauren Greydale

↳ Age

15 Standard Years

↳ Species

Human

↳ Grade

10

↳ Extracurriculars

Drama Club

Schedule for Skyline Millenium (Skymill)'s Academy of Neutral Relations

Period 1 (0730-0820) Stellar Cartography

Period 2 (0825 - 0915) Advanced Temporal Mechanics

Period 3 (0920 - 1010) Calculus B.C.

Period 4 (1015 - 1105) Physics C. Mechanics

Period 5 (1110 - 1200) Organic Chemistry

LUNCH (1200 - 1230)

Period 6 (1235 - 1325) Robotics

Period 7 (13:30 - 14:25) Warp Theory

"I'm sensing a common theme here," Lani said eloquently as she read her schedule with pursed lips.

"What is that?" Toast asked, arching an eyebrow and clasping his hands together, but there was a glimmer of amusement buried there.

"You don't want us to draw attention to our talents," Lani said. "Like Tubbo with operations, or me with medicine."

Toast nodded, his expression finally solemn. "It is one thing to be a smart student," he said finally. "It is quite another to be a five foot even fifteen-year-old medicinal *prodigy* with brown hair and an older brother who is quite adept at operations." He tilted his head. "You see?"

"So...we can't hang out with each other?" Drista asked.

Toast shook his head. "No, you can. I would keep it in smaller groups—two to three of you at a time, except for maybe at lunch. Make a big show of meeting each other for the first time. Sell it. You've all read your fake backstories—don't stray from them. They're backed by false paperwork and'll hold up under ninety-five percent of inspections, barring military data." He smiled. "Remember to check in with Sykkuno and Abe every night."

Profile

Daleyza Luther

↳ Age

16 Standard Years

↳ Species

Human

↳ Grade

10

↳ Extracurriculars

Choir

Schedule for Skyline Millenium (Skymill)'s Academy of Neutral Relations

Period 1 (0730-0820) Survival Strategies

Period 2 (0825 - 0915) Advanced Temporal Mechanics

Period 3 (0920 - 1010) Forensic Psychology

Period 4 (1015 - 1105) Calculus A.B

Period 5 (1110 - 1200) Xenolinguistics

LUNCH (1200 - 1230)

Period 6 (1235 - 1325) Lifetime Fitness

Period 7 (13:30 - 14:25) Ancient Philosophies

"Why the fuck am I in choir?" Drista said with a frown.

"You have a good singing voice," Tommy pointed out.

"Yeah, but it's not *that* good."

"Actually, it's fairly good," Rae spoke up. "For never having taken singing lessons and growing up a spy. Good enough to pass inspection."

"How do *you* know?"

"I listened to the audio from that one gala six of you once attended," Rae said with a casual shrug. Tommy bit the inside of his cheek until he could taste the iron, his mind flashing back to two things—the meeting he'd had with Deo, which he'd *still* never brought up—that had to be a security issue—and the dance he'd done with Ranboo. Based on the pinched look that was on Tubbo's face, he clearly was thinking of the Enderian as well.

"That's *public*?" Drista shrieked, her cheeks flaming red.

"No, but I am an officer," Rae pointed out.

"That's—that's abuse of power!" Drista cried out. She turned to Purpled. "It is, right?"

Purpled shrugged. "Don't look at me," he drawled. "I fake emails and signatures all the time. Not to mention I've screened your messages a few times."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," Toast said dryly. "For both our sakes."

"Remember," Sykkuno told Tommy. "Abe and I will be here on standby in one of the G.R.-owned space stations. Just press your panic button if you need us. Or if you need anything." Tommy's hand unconsciously went to the nonchalant watch that he and the four other kids wore—each different, but all with the same purpose. Sykkuno watched the motion, and pushed a feeling across their bond that Tommy couldn't one-hundred percent identify as an emotion—*communicative-okay*, maybe?—and then the other Avian withdrew, though he still shimmered enough to let Tommy know he hadn't put up any shields, or anything. Sykkuno had never had the openness between bonds that Rae had, but Tommy was worse than he was, so he wasn't quite one to judge. Sykkuno continued, saying, "The *Mira* will be back in two weeks to pick you up, regardless of success or failure."

"Hopefully," Purpled muttered, because the *Mira* was going away to support a minor space battle in quadrant seventeen. Even though it was rated only a minor hazard, that didn't mean it was completely free from danger.

Everyone ignored him.

"We don't *need* the datachip *itself*," Sykkuno stressed. "It would be helpful to *get* it since we know Governor Mairet has not transferred the information *off* the planet, though it can't be one hundred percent confirmed he has it—hence sending you guys in instead of an infiltration unit. But if your life is in danger—if you are compromised in *any* way, you get out of there. You hear me? This is strictly an observation and information collection mission. You do *not* engage. You do not pass go. You do not collect a hundred dollars."

There was a moment of silence. Abe, the security officer standing behind Sykkuno, coughed pointedly into his fist.

"What is a dollar?" Lani asked, her eyebrow twitching in confusion.

"It's old Terran currency," Tubbo, the ass-kissing bastard, pipped up instantly. "Though I don't understand the reference."

Sykkuno sighed. "It doesn't matter. Are we clear?"

Five *sir*, *yes*, *sir*'s rang out, and only one of them was sarcastic.

Sykkuno nodded. "Great. We'll be dropping the five of you off at four different stations, and you will take the transports to school."

Lani raised her hand. "Four?" she asked.

"Drista and I are posing as siblings," Tommy said with a grimace, fingering his now-black hair. It was temporary—unlike his 'sister's'—and would wash off when the activator was washed in, but until then he was stuck looking like a pale emo wannabe. Drista grinned at him, her eyes oddly blue from behind the colored contacts. That would never cease to be weird.

"Oh, right," Lani said, sounding embarrassed.

"Never dye your hair black, Tommy," Purpled drawled. "It doesn't suit you."

"You have blue hair," he retorted.

"What, are you jealous?" Purpled said with a nasty grin, running a hand through his hair—it was a few inches shorter, more cropped to his head, and a toxic shade of cobalt blue. His eyes were also a normal shade of brown—which was so unlike him that, paired with the slight spray tan the Human boy had been given, made him look not at all like the Purpled Tommy knew.

Which he supposed was the point. None of them did. Drista had blue eyes, and Tommy was wearing contacts that slightly dampened the shade of his eyes away from cerulean and more towards gray-blue. He had black hair, now, and his hair had been chopped back further. He almost felt cold, now, and missed the curls that had once annoyed him.

Kaeria, the neutral-zone planet where Skyline Millenium's Academy of Neutral Relations was located—damn that was a mouthful—was just another Terra-sized rock floating near the inner edges of the Goldilocks zone, making it a tropical paradise. Tommy rubbed the sweat off his face as he dragged a random suitcase that Toast had pulled from who-knows-where, waving goodbye to the nondescript shuttle that he knew Hafu was flying, even though the windshields were tinted. He shifted awkwardly in his school uniform, which was a dark blue sweater and vest with deep grey slacks and black dress shoes—and thought to the last time he had worn a school uniform, besides Fleet School. Drista flounced off almost instantly, going to purchase a train ticket for the both of them, and leaving him to deal—see: guard—both of their suitcases.

The 'mandatory uniforms' on Pogtopia hadn't really *been* mandatory, with most people shedding them under the heat of the red sun, but Tommy still remembered the stiff, semi-cheap quality of the dress shirt, which was dark grey and red, the schools' colors.

He squinted up at the nearest clock, which only had twenty-two hours on it—okay, so Kaeria spun slightly faster. He had five minutes until the next train came so that he could sign in and get his stuff situated. Drista needed to—

"Hey."

Tommy jumped, hand going for a phaser that wasn't there anymore—the only weapon he had was Purpled's knife, buried at the bottom of his luggage. There was a person standing there, in the same uniform as him, albeit smaller, because they were just around Lani's height, and made Tommy wonder if they were a Shulker—before discarding it as they flashed Tommy a small grin that had a set of canines that could only be a Feline's. They had long straight brown hair, like Lani's, and chocolate-brown eyes that shone with hidden mirth.

"Uh, hey," he said stupidly.

"I take it you're one of the fifty-two students studying abroad from Galactic Rebellion Academy of Space Exploration and Protection?" they asked him casually, leaning against their old suitcase. Tommy gave them an odd look, and they laughed. "Oh, we had messages about it from—uh, the Governor." Tommy wasn't quite going to call them out on the note of

contempt that crossed their face at that notion. "He was like *oh, you'd better be nice to them*, blah blah blah."

"Hmm," Tommy hummed under his breath. When Toast had said a 'believable backstory' and the 'right opportunity', Tommy hadn't quite known that there would be *fifty-two* students from Fleet School. He'd known the five of them wouldn't be the only ones, but he supposed that only fifteen or so students wouldn't really hold up under a closer look, so Toast had probably broadened the horizon. "Yeah. That's me. Are you a student there?"

Dumb question.

Instead of making fun of him, they only laughed it off. "Yeah. Eight years. We just got back from winter break."

Tommy glanced around. "It's very... winter-y."

He needed to start sounding less like an idiot.

"You should see the summer," they said dryly. "It can get up to a hundred and ten degrees on a good day." They brightened dramatically. "I'll help you get signed in and show you around. It'll be a good excuse anyway."

For what hung on the edges of Tommy's tongue, but he discarded those words after a second thought. It wasn't quite fair to dig into their personal life after just meeting them, not to mention that he was supposed to lie to them for the next two weeks.

"I'm Timothy," he said finally, holding out a hand, the unfamiliar name curling around his throat. "Timothy Luther. You can call me Tim." He nodded in the direction of the terminal, where Drista was watching him impatiently, two tickets clutched in her hand. "My younger sister over there, the one glaring at us, is Daleyza, but you can call her Dal."

They smiled at him, taking his hand with fingerless gloves, their brown eyes bright, and reminding Tommy of the brilliant wonder he'd seen in the eyes of the younger kids. "I'm Aimsey," they said. "Just Aimsey. I do hope we'll be good friends."

i do not fucking understand shit

Chapter Notes

we finally reached 100k words :)

[@whispering_rozy](#) created a beautiful TCR animatic [here](#)
GO CHECK IT OUT!!!

"May you live all the days of you life."

- Jonathan Swift

Tommy resolutely did not look at Purpled as he entered his first period of the day— Interspecies Ethics, which he shared with the now-blue-haired Human, as well as, surprisingly, Aimsey, who grinned at him and came to take the chair that was empty next to him.

"How'd you sleep?" she asked sympathetically.

Tommy winced. The Arachnids had fucked with his brain *forever* ago and made him so he got migraines when he wasn't in either false gravity or in low gravity, and unfortunately for him, Kaeria was only slightly less gravity than Terra, with the acceleration of gravity sitting at around nine point four meters per second. So while he could sleep, he got massive headaches that he only took pain meds for during the day due to them having caffeine, and had horrific nightmares every night of everyone dying.

(As opposed to his real life, where everyone died anyway.)

"Not well, huh?" Aimsey said, cocking his head. He reached over and patted Tommy's arm consolingly. "Nervous for your first day?"

Tommy shook his head jerkingly. "Not really. Just... couldn't sleep, I guess."

In truth, he had dreamed of the *U.S.S Midway*, and for some unknown reason, Sniff's face had been replaced with Aimsey's, their voice pleading as they begged him not to leave him—not like he'd left everyone else. He'd been forced to step away, fighting the dream as it dragged him away from the people whose begs turned into spiteful hisses and glaring guilt. He had woken up three times in a cold sweat with a massive headache, instinctively reaching for a datapad to message Purpled before remembering that his datapad was school-issued and it would be extremely suspicious to message a kid he wasn't supposed to know. Not to mention they were probably monitored, and saying *hey I'm having dreams about Sniff dying* would set off more than a few alarms. Thankfully, Toast had taken Niki's medical notes into account when creating his profile, and while Tommy felt a tiny bit bad about having 'migraines,' it was better than not having meds—or telling the school the ridiculous truth.

The professor of Interspecies Ethics, Mr. Snow, a Human, had been vetted by Rae just to appease Purpled's concerns—actually, Rae and eup had vetted *all* their teachers, and it wasn't just for Purpled, because Drista and Lani both had anxiety about bad teachers after the... incident... with Ms. Zahendia—the two scars on his arm, one from one of her claws and one from the tracker that she'd removed forcibly—and Tommy had far more trauma to deal with than yet another mentor that should've been better.

The bell rang, and most of the students fell silent; all roughly fifty-something of them in the lecture hall; a far fewer number of students than had been in his classes during Fleet school—but, well, he supposed it *was* Fleet school. Mr. Snow cleared his throat, and the remaining murmurs stopped. Tommy tilted his head and watched the other students' faces—watched Aimsey's face, as she was sitting right next to him—but the silence wasn't fearful; more respectful. That's what made him relax further.

He stiffened again when, in his glance around the classroom, he caught sight of an Arachnid, grinning at a Merling, the two clearly friends. Toast had warned him that since this was a neutral zone that they would be here—Arachnids weren't *all* evil; he knew that as well as the next Avian, no matter what he'd screamed at Deo about his people killing Tommy's parents—but obviously Deo had insisted there were more 'good' Arachnids than the Galactic Rebellion thought. Not that Tommy had reported that.

"I understand that we have three new students," Mr. Snow said, and Tommy banished the thoughts from his head and turned towards the teacher. Technically, he didn't need good grades, but he also didn't quite want to *stand out*—just so he could do some intel later on—so paying attention was probably smart.

Drista would make fun of him for years if he got a detention—or whatever form of punishment they used here that preferably wasn't bodily harm, though he didn't think it was; physical punishments against children in schools was generally considered 'child abuse'—not that it'd stopped Ms. Zahendia—and wasn't used in the more civilized areas of the galaxy.

"Please stand up, introduce yourself, your preferred pronouns, your origin, and your favorite color," Mr. Snow said patiently.

Tommy stood up, noting out of the corner of his eye that Purpled had stood up as well, as well as an Elytrian girl three rows down and to the right. He was silent for a moment, his lips half-parted, and wondering if he should speak first. If that would be awkward.

Purpled, who had never really feared awkwardness, went first. "I'm Parker Peterson," he drawled—yes, drawled!—and Tommy very nearly squinted at him. "Pronouns are he-slash-him. I'm Human, and my favorite color is blue." He grinned broadly—a rare expression for him, even if it was, on this occasion, fake—and pointed at his hair, which was violently aqua. "Obviously."

There were several laughs around him—when he tried, Purpled had always had the best charisma; not that he *tried* to be liked very often. Purpled did a small little bow before he sat back down—collapsed heavily into his seat, more like, a wicked smirk on his face—and the boy next to him leaned in, whispering something under his breath. Purpled seemed attentive as he listed, but made eye contact with Tommy and winked with eyes that were all the wrong color.

"I'm Vy'vi'ahn Ah'neh'strah," the Elytrian girl with red hair offered, her pale orange wings shifting as she did a small circle in the classroom to let them all see her face, smiling a nervous half-smile. "She-slash-they. My favorite color is indigo." She flashed a grin in Purpled's direction. "Not as obviously." They sat down after that, looking relieved that they'd made a few of their classmates smile.

Tommy took a deep breath, which didn't quite help his nerves. Despite his hair being a shortened black, and his eyes being ocean-blue instead of the odd cerulean, he felt like someone was going to jump up and recognize him as the leader of the Children's Rebellion—he'd seen his face in the press, of course; blurry pictures taken from a distance from his time on Terra—though all of them had incidentally been through members of either the *Mira* or the *L'manburg*. Tommy didn't like to check the news very often—there was always something mentioning the Red Planet's Genocide in one of the columns, and it made him nauseous.

"I'm Timothy Luther," he announced, feeling his hands clamp up; though, fortunately, his throat did not freeze up too. "You can, uh, call me, uh, Tim. Uh—he-slash-him. And, uh, my favorite color is—"

"Gold," he'd said finally, and Purpled had exhaled sharply. "Gold like the grass of Pogtopia."

"But...that's brown," Drista had said, confused.

"It wasn't always," he'd said lightly, not particularly minding the question, rude as it'd been. Lani had elbowed the green-eyed Human pointedly. "It used to be prettier. You know, when some parasite didn't take it over."

Oh, how long ago that seemed.

"—magenta," he finished, and Purpled only raised a singular eyebrow at him, a real smirk twitching at the corners of his lips.

Tommy pointedly ignored him, and sat down. Aimsey grinned at him, throwing a small thumbs-up with their gloved hand, as if he hadn't stuttered four times. He could shoot Arachnids, but he couldn't introduce himself in front of everyone. Great.

He probably shouldn't be thinking that in a room that had two Arachnids in it, neither of whom looked uncomfortable, and neither of whom were new to the school.

"Today we are going to be talking about interspecies biosocial communitarianism," Mr. Snow said, continuing with the class as if nothing had happened. "From previous classes, we know what means—" Tommy had, in fact, no clue what biosocial meant. He didn't have the

credentials for this class; they were all faked. "Does anyone know what communitarianism is?"

A hand from a Feline girl in the front row shot up, her arm raising excitedly. She was the only one.

Mr. Snow made a small show of looking around carefully before selecting the girl.

"Communitarianism is a philosophy that emphasizes the connection between the individual and the community. Its overriding philosophy is based upon the belief that a person's social identity and personality are largely molded by community relationships, with a smaller degree of development being placed on individualism," the girl recited, as if she'd been reading from her datapad—though nothing lay on the desk in front of her.

"Yes, Addeighson, precisely," Mr. Snow said with a long-suffering smile, and *Addeighson* beamed with joy. "Down to the word."

"Thank you," she said primly, and Tommy scowled at a few bits of laughter that came from corners of the room. At least she could answer it—unlike everyone else in the room. She might've been a suck-up, but that didn't mean she wasn't smart.

Maybe that was his protectiveness of Tubbo coming through, though.

"Essentially," Mr. Snow explained. "People develop differently in different communities. Now, you may be asking yourself—what does this have to do with interspecies ethics?"

Tommy had not been asking himself that at all. In fact, he'd been checking the clock—but there were still forty-five minutes left, and so he pained himself to a class that he had absolutely no idea what was going on in.

"It has been proven," Mr. Snow continued, to the rapt attention of perhaps half the class, and the glazed eyes of the other half, which unfortunately included Tommy. "That communities

with ranges of origins function better, and develop better overall. Different origins, of course, mean different strengths and drawbacks, and therefore a more put-together community without the need to focus on one thing for survival."

A hand rose from the second row—an Enderian girl. "Sir," she said petulantly, when he pointed at her and paused in his speech. "I thought it was true that origins, particularly Humans and Elytrians, work *extremely* well together, instead of intermixed?" She looked around worriedly after her question, like people were going to say it'd been racist, or something.

Mr. Snow was already nodding, as if he'd expected this question—he was a teacher; perhaps he had. "That is true when it comes to problem-solving. Obviously—to use your example, Yallum—Humans had to develop *somehow*; or Terra would not be what it was today."

"A shitshow of epic proportions," Aimsey muttered under his breath, and Tommy frowned at him, his stomach flipping in his chest. Aimsey seemed not to notice Tommy's scowl, crossing her arms towards the front.

In Tommy's humble opinion, Terra was quite beautiful, if only slightly smoggy in city areas with the remains of overpopulation over seven centuries prior. Apparently, the globe could change a lot with a world government—as well as the cessation of carbon dioxide and other harmful greenhouse gasses being pumped into the air. Tommy's Human History teacher had been very crass in her words about the ancestors of the Terrans and how royally they had fucked with their planet, bringing it closer to ruin than any other origin.

Of course, that'd been they'd also made the most progress, moving to Mars, Luna, Venus, Europa, and several other colonies within the Terran solar system, as well as opening up trades to other origins after they'd been discovered by the Elytrians with more trustworthiness than any of the rest combined, and starting the Galactic Rebellion against the Arachnids after a series of infractions.

"But they— *we* —work better with a range," Mr. Snow was quick to point out. "The Universe may have shaped us in similar ways, with our bipedalism and binocular vision, as well as many other attributes—but we are inherently different." He waved his hand, and a holographic presentation opened behind him. Tommy jumped slightly in his seat, and Aimsey turned their head at him, staring curiously. He ignored them. Mr. Snow waved a hand—he must have some kind of sensor or something—and the basic representation of a Blazeborn

came up, though Tommy only knew that because the words *Blazeborn* were written at the top. "Blazeborn, who originate from the Nether—as they call it—Nether IV, as it is officially classed, run hot-blooded and have a far easier time handling hotter temperatures." He smiled, turning back to the class. "They would fare much better in a desert than any of the rest, and would suffer frostbite in what many of you consider simply a chill." Mr. Snow waved his hand again, and the diagram shifted to that of an Elytrian. "This one, of course, is, easier at first glance—flight is an essential identity of *being* an Elytrian, and losing one's wings..." he trailed off, and several Elytrian students shuddered at the implication.

Tommy schooled himself neutrally, trying not to shiver at the memory of the horrific scars that had been on Sniff's back. She had never gotten to fly, and had expressed that, well, *you could never really miss something you never had*, but Tommy had known her a little bit better than surface-level, and knew, instinctually, that she had longed to fly until the day she had died.

"*K'yaif'lgh'e*," someone murmured, and Tommy *recognized* the word—from one of Sniff's parents, maybe; certainly nothing Phil or Hannah had ever said; or even any of the members of the *Mira*—but he had no clue what it meant, and he got the feeling he would get no answer if he asked.

"Of course, Elytrians also have weaker bones," Mr. Snow continued, after a momentary pause. "They do not intrinsically work well with outsiders, and are possessive of their culture —" There were a few snickers that echoed throughout the classroom; some inside joke Tommy didn't know. "—and have the longest life of all the origins by far, which may be one of the reasons for the higher percentage of Elytrians—higher than other origins, that is, at roughly eighteen percent—that never truly *interact* with a member of another origin. And *no*, Paul," he said, directing his voice to a Feline that had raised his hand. "That does not include basic pleasantries. I meant the formation of relationships of any kind."

There were more snickers.

Another person raised their hand. Mr. Snow seemed slightly surprised as he turned towards the Human. "Yes, Kai?"

"Isn't long life a blessing, not a curse?" they asked softly.

Mr. Snow was silent for a moment, and then turned to address the rest of the class, most of whom were paying attention. "This is not meant in any offense towards you at all, Kai—I get this question every semester. Please raise your hand if you would like to have the lifespan that Elytrians do."

Tommy's hand was in the air near-instantly, and it was not for himself—and definitely not for Chroma—it was for Rae and Sykkuno, who would not live three decades more, if they died of old age, that was—and their friends would live on, painfully in mourning. It was for all the people who would be left behind in the wake of a short life.

"Avians come of age younger?" he remembered asking, confused. "Why?"

"Because Avians only live forty to sixty years," Rae had said, and there had been a sadness in her eyes.

He was not the only one—ninety percent of the non-Elytrian kids had their hands up. Purpled, noticeably, did not.

Not a single one of the Elytrians did.

Mr. Snow smiled a half-smile. "You see?" he said. "We will always wish for what we do not have." He sounded awfully similar to Rae when she'd explained to Tommy how Drista was struggling with accepting her humanity, and abruptly, he wished that Drista was taking this class, before shame-facedly remembering that they were on a mission, not actually at school.

Still.

Mr. Snow pointed at the orange-winged Elytrian who had been new alongside Purpled and Tommy. She looked a bit like a deer caught in headlights. "Vy'vi'ahn, was it?" They nodded fervently. "Would you be comfortable explaining why your hand is not raised?"

Vy'vi'ahn licked their lips, nodding their head. "Yes, well," they said slowly. "To, uh, start it off—I'm thirty-one."

They didn't look thirty-one. In fact, remove the wings—*metaphorically*—and they looked like the Human equivalent of a seventeen-year-old. He supposed that was sort of the point, though.

"You've aged well," the Blazeborn girl next to them told them, only a hint of dryness in her tone.

Vy'vi'ahn was older than Valkyrae, and hadn't even reached her coming-of-age yet, which was at thirty-four—more than twice the years of an Avian's coming-of-age at fourteen. And she would live a great many years further. It had always struck Tommy as odd that the lifespans of Avians and Elytrians differed so vastly, with Elytrians having the longest lifespan of the discovered origins—barring Starborn and Sl'ymǎ, of which little to nothing was known—and Avians having the shortest lifespan, despite them sharing the same system. No other origins had two planets in the same system with intelligent life.

Or they *had* shared the same system. Now Avia was nothing but rings of rock around Elytra, destroyed by an asteroid and preserved out of memory, and the reason for a globular-wide shield barrier around her sister planet.

Vy'vi'ahn raised her chin, looking braver at that moment than all of her time speaking in front of the classroom combined. "Barring all other Elytrians in this chamber," they said, their voice eerily assertive. "And barring imminent demise or a brutal death—" There was a bit of choked laughter at that statement, but in a galaxy divided by war, it was far more possible than it had ever been before. Particularly since Kaeria was in neutral space, and wasn't protected by either the front lines of the Galactic Rebellion or the Arachnids. "—I will outlive everyone in this room." She said it like it was a fact, which it was. "And maybe I'll make friends with your children, should you choose to have them. And then I will outlive your children. And your children's children. And your children's children's children—I will outlive roughly ten to fifteen *generations* of your family; until you are nothing but a name in a family tree, and a memory in your great-great-great grandchildren's minds. But you will have meant so much to me, and there will be nobody around that cares enough to remember." They let out the breath, and it was audible in the silence of the room. "I will lose everyone I love to the passing of time over and over and over, until I withdraw from any society that is not Elytrian, bitter from the pain of losing the *sa'saigua*."

That word, Tommy knew.

It meant short-lived.

"And if—when—I finally succumb to the hands of time, there will be nobody there but the other cursed Elytrians who understand my pain," Vy'vi'ahn said, sounding frustrated. "So says my father. And my father's father. And my father's father's father. Five generations of my family ago, Terra was discovered by Elytrians. For most of you—for Humans—that would be forty generations. Eight hundred years." Their lips twisted. "Eight hundred and seventeen, precisely."

And for Avians, Tommy thought bitterly. It would've been a hundred generations.

To Phil, Rae's life was just beginning—and yet to her, it was over half over, and she was nearing the end. She must've felt like a child to him, and yet, proportionally, was far older.

"So yes," Vy'vi'ahn whispered. "It is a blessing, to live throughout history—it is why Elytrians have the most well-documented history; because so many live through it. And yet it is a curse to live among other origins—to be *biosocially communicative*—because I will watch you bloom and die like flowers in a field, and I will watch your legacy fade from any known memory." They smiled, and it was bitter. "Sometimes the best thing to do is to die young."

That's not true, Tommy thought bitterly—but there were two people in the room that knew of the lifespan of Avians; so accidentally guarded that it was—and it would be a bit more than strange to know the lifespan of the species that was the closest to extinction.

People would always wish for what they did not have, after all—such was the nature of wanting. Of idealization.

"How was your first day of classes?" Sykkuno asked them, through the untraceable link the crew of the *Mira* had set up before they'd left, which allowed Tommy and the rest to holo call one of the Galactic Rebellion space stations without it being intercepted or traced. "Any leads?"

Tubbo shifted, drawing everyone's attention. His camera was pointed at his desk as he straightened up from leaning over his datapad, a scowl of frustration written on his face. "Why is the biochem homework so *fucking* difficult?"

"Why the hell are you *doing* biochem homework?" Drista retorted.

"I'm trying to blend in!" Tubbo insisted.

"No, you're being a nerd," Tommy said, leaning back in his seat. "You like doing work that challenges you." He made a face.

"You're just saying that because you didn't know what a Riemann's sum was in calc," Lani told him. "And everyone laughed at you."

"Who laughed at you?" Purpled asked sharply.

"Oh, now he speaks," Drista muttered.

"Nobody made fun of me!" Tommy declared, throwing up his hands.

Sykkuno cleared his throat. "If you five are quite done," he said, sounding like he was holding back amusement. "Do you have any leads on the data drive?"

Drista shook her head. "The Governor wasn't in today," she explained. "He's off-planet for another day and a half."

Tubbo raised his hand, and everyone looked at him. "I think I could try to search for potential keywords in order to find evidence of the data, but I'd need a direct port into the system." He gave a heaving sigh. "They don't let students into the system room. I checked."

"They do," Lani said in a low voice. She chewed her lower lip, looking slightly embarrassed. "We have to run calculations in robotics, and, um, I heard some of the seniors in the back wondering if we'd get to use the system's computers to do it instead of doing it by hand, 'cause it's faster."

Sykkuno perked up. "Now we're getting somewhere. When's your first project?"

"Five days," Lani said. "It's a solo project. I don't know anything about robotics."

"You could make it as complicated as possible and then ask for permission to use the servers," Tubbo suggested.

"Except I'm no good at coding, or math, or..." Lani started with a groan, before trailing off with a grimace when she realized who she was talking to.

"Thanks for volunteering," Tommy told Tubbo solemnly, who scowled at him.

"We have a possible lead," Sykkuno said. "Lani, Tubbo, I want you to check it out." The siblings nodded resolutely, Tubbo looking far more unhappy than Lani—he probably *was* going to finish all his homework, the nerd. "Anyone else?"

"Mr. Palushi is a horrible person," Purpled burst out.

"That's not a lead, but why do you think so?" Sykkuno asked patiently.

Tommy groaned. "Purpled, I told you it was *fine*—"

"We were talking about self-preservation in Debate and Diplomacy 101," Purpled said harshly. "The Red Planet's Genocide came up, and Mr. Palushi asked the class if we thought it was selfish to steal food and hoard it in a time of starvation. We have to prepare a debate speech for it." Tommy felt nauseous just thinking about it—he knew for a fact that *someone* would look past the emotion of the moment and talk callously about it, like they were a chessboard and pieces in a game.

There was a moment of silence.

"How does that always happen to you?" Tubbo wondered.

"The Red Planet's Genocide is a recent-enough event that *nobody*, Arachnid or Galactic Rebellion, wishes to have a repeat of," Sykkuno said, a neutral look on his face, but Tommy felt a flash of *anger-retribution-vexation* flash through their bond. Rae's side of the bond, which was distant, as she was now lightyears away, pulsed, but no exact emotion made its way through. "It will be talked about with common reoccurrence for the next decade."

"I don't want to have to listen to people talk about how literal children were selfish for breaking into warehouses and not sharing the food," Purpled said coldly. "They already get enough shit as it was for clapping for their friends' deaths—as if they weren't held at literal gunpoint to do so."

Tommy hadn't known that. Then again, there was a reason he didn't go on social media. Or read very many news articles that weren't relevant to the subjects he'd specifically searched for.

Sykkuno's face softened. "I can call you out sick, if you want," he said softly. "Both of you."

"It's fine," Tommy said swiftly, not wanting to wreck the mission.

Purpled eyed him. "I plan on making the best goddamn debate speech known to man," he said stiffly. "From the perspective of an outsider, of course," he added, when Sykkuno raised an eyebrow at him.

Drista snorted. "At least you don't have to retake Survival Strategies," she said, looking miserable. "That class makes me want to blow myself up."

"Why, because the last one marooned you on a planet?" Purpled deadpanned.

Drista glared at him. "Shut up!"

Sykkuno sighed. "You five made much more progress today than I'd hoped," he said with a smile. "Get some rest—and don't do all your homework, Tubbo, please. We need your mind put together. Have a good night."

They echoed their goodnights, and ended the call, one by one. Tommy lingered until he was the only one left, mouth half-open in a question that was stuck in his throat.

"Yes, Tommy?" Sykkuno asked kindly.

"Do you—" he started, and then flushed when the words wouldn't come out. Sykkuno waited, patient as always. "Do you ever wish that you would live longer?"

There was a breadth of silence. Then Sykkuno said, "Whatever brought this on?"

Tommy grimaced. "Ah, a girl in my first period said that—never mind. It's a stupid question."

"It's not a stupid question," Sykkuno said. "Sometimes I forget you never grew up with Avians."

He bristled. "I *did*—!"

"Not long enough for your coming-of-age," Sykkuno pointed out, and Tommy fell silent with a half-sowl on his face. Sykkuno pursed his lips. "To answer your question—I came to peace with my lifespan many years before."

"How can you accept that?" he asked hollowly. "How can anyone?"

"If I didn't have this lifespan," Sykkuno said with a smile. "I wouldn't be an Avian. I wouldn't be best friends with Rae. I wouldn't know you as well as I do. I wouldn't have saved your life." He shook his head slowly. "I am happy with who I am, Tommy. If I wasn't an Avian, I wouldn't be me. And that would be unacceptable. Do you see?"

"I suppose," he said.

All he could think about, though, was standing in front of two dark coffins and whispering the words *may their souls rest among the stars* to two people whose friends would live double their lifespans and more.

"Plura ey eu'mellohi tah lihmua," Sykkuno said.

Tommy's head shot up. "What did you just say?" he said, feeling numb.

Sykkuno frowned at him. "It's one of the Avian sayings." He waved an arm. "It translates to ___"

"No," Tommy said. "The—the fourth word. What is it?"

"'Tah'? It's a connector—"

"No!" he shouted, and Sykkuno fell silent. Tommy squeezed his eyes shut, fighting back the tears. "You said—'you mellohi'—"

"Eu'mellohi. 'Eu' at the beginning of a word is a determiner—"

"Mellohi," he whispered. "Is that an Avian word?"

Sykkuno was silent for a moment. "Yes," he said.

"What does it mean?"

"'Plura ey eu'mellohi tah lihmua' translates to 'such is the sacrifice of life,' so it means—"

"—sacrifice," he whispered.

Mellohi had meant sacrifice, and he had never even known why he'd named the dhi'sk that. It had been just some silly word recalled from his memories in a language he knew Wilbur didn't speak. He hadn't even known what it meant.

It was some sick joke the Universe was playing with him.

Mellohi meant sacrifice.

Tommy ended the call.

End Notes

I will not take pity on you if you don't read the tags and then complain later one when they happen

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